Table of Contents

Preface

Chapter 1: Blip M

Chapter 2: Retrieval

Chapter 3: Decontamination

Chapter 4: What's Two Plus Two?

Chapter 5: Live First

Chapter 6: Let's Talk/ Rocky and the Space Blobs

Chapter 7: Better Behavior

Chapter 8: Where No One Has Gone Before

Chapter 9: The Sub

Chapter 10: The Stars

Chapter 11: The Holodeck

Chapter 12: The Fox

Chapter 13: Contamination

Chapter 14: Blood-vestigation

Chapter 15: Safe

Chapter 16: Astrophage School

Chapter 17: The Father’s Sword

Chapter 18: The Cabinet

Chapter 19: The Butcher

Chapter 20: Rations

Chapter 21: Good Thing It Was You

Chapter 22: "Can I...?"

Chapter 23: Behavioral Observations

Chapter 24: Fuckin' Aliens

Chapter 25: A Scientist, an Engineer, and a Pilot

Chapter 26: Debris

Chapter 27: The Tiger and the Rice Cakes

Chapter 28: Give All

Chapter 29: Deja Vu

Chapter 30: Crew

Chapter 31: Tell Me

Chapter 32: Filament Station

Chapter 33: Borrowed Time

Chapter 34: Ezekiel

Chapter 35: Rocky Save Leaky Space Blobs

Chapter 36: Astrophage Class 401

Chapter 37: Promise

Chapter 38: Horizon

Chapter 39: Just a Tree

Chapter 40: Epilogue: Grace and Simon

Chapter 41: Epilogue: Rocky and Adrian

Afterword

It's Worth It

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/85475771.

Rating:

Explicit

Archive Warning:

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:

M/M

Fandoms:

Iron Lung (2026), Iron Lung (Video Game), Project Hail Mary - Andy Weir, Project Hail Mary (2026)

Relationships:

The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung)/Ryland Grace, The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung) & Ryland Grace

Characters:

Rocky (Project Hail Mary), The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung), Ryland Grace

Additional Tags:

Bottom The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung), Eventual Smut, Slow Burn, Meet-Ugly, Ryland Grace & Rocky are Best Friends, Canon-Typical Violence, Dubious Science, BloodyMary BloodyMay 2026 (Iron Lung/Project Hail Mary), Fluff and Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Let Rocky Say Fuck (Project Hail Mary), The Convict | Simon Needs a Hug (Iron Lung), The Convict | Simon Has Religious Trauma (Iron Lung), Touch-Starved The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung), Autistic Ryland Grace, Touch-Starved Ryland Grace, Canon - Book & Movie Combination, POV Third Person Limited, Amputee The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung), Demisexual Ryland Grace, Implied/Referenced Suicide, not ai, Fuck AI, Rocky is a he/him lesbian. I will not be taking questions at this time, Hearing loss The Convict | Simon (Iron Lung), BloodyMary, Special fonts (Screen-

reader friendly version available), Angst with a Happy Ending, Happy Ending

Language:

English

Stats:

Published: 2026-05-31 Completed: 2026-06-21 Words: 79,677 Chapters: 41/41

It's Worth It

by HulkJanitor

Summary

Grace and Rocky are on their way to Erid when they encounter a strange terrestrial vessel that has somehow made its way to space. The single occupant is alive and Grace and Rocky rescue him, but they are then faced with the challenge of gaining this stranger's trust and dealing with the contamination he brought with him.

slaps roof of fic This bad boy can fit so many near-death experiences in it! But also friendship! And fucking (eventually)!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Blip M

Grace squinted at the radar readout, trying to parse what he was seeing.

“What the heck is that?”

Rocky jittered in his ball, holding his light translator up to the feed. *“Fuck what?? Question!? Amaze, amaze, amaze.”*

“Hey, language.” Grace regretted having exchanged fun facts about swear words. He swung himself into the pilot chair. “Hey Mary, how fast is the uh —” he craned his neck towards the screen “How fast is Blip-M going?”

24.9 kilometers per second.

Grace twisted back in his chair. “Rocky give me some quick math, if we slow down enough to match it, will we have enough Astrophage to get back up to speed and still make it to Erid?”

“Why Grace not do it. Question?”

“Time is of the essence here, bud. You can do it faster.”

"Grace just lazy.”

Grace started swapping the displays on the various screens, preparing to slow down and do some delicate maneuvers. “How’s that math looking, Rock?”

“Math not look like anything.”

Grace suppressed a groan. (It only encouraged him)

“Can we slow down?”

"Yes. But Rocky and Grace in space for 16 extra days.”

Grace weighed that. On the one hand, he was already running on pretty thin margins for food. Rocky had plenty, but Grace was working with a limited supply that he only had because Yào and Ilyukhina hadn’t survived the journey.

On the other hand… weird space object… pretty tempting.

“Hmmmm….Rocky, heads or tails?”

“Heads or tails. Question?”

“...Never mind. Mary, slow to match Blip-M's speed.”

They were passing through the deepest section of astrophage infected space. The stars here were faint, and the Petrova lines were thick and irregular. They weren’t just singular curves between planets and stars. Instead, the view through the Petrovoscope was a web of splitting lines like tree branches. It created a thick canopy of stippled red dots.

Grace had to guess there just wasn’t enough in-system energy left for the astrophage to sustain themselves. They seemed to be absorbing the light reaching them from distant stars too, reducing them to rare glimmers before they disappeared again. The inky expanse around them was dark. Grace was sure the rest of the stars were still out there, that the hungry astrophage was just soaking up the crumbs of light before it could reach his eyes, but the dark was unnerving. It was so eerily dark that Grace could barely make out the shape of “Blip M” using the *Hail Mary’s* external lights.

Blip-M was three cylinders bundled tightly together. It was one large cylinder and two smaller ones making it vaguely Mickey-mouse shaped when viewed head-on. It was obviously man-made, or alien-made... *somebody*-made?... Grace mentally went with “not-naturally-occurring”.

It looked like a ship of some kind, but it was tiny. Like two-and-half Graces or seven Rockies from end-to-end. (Fuck metric and imperial. Grace was using no standardized measurements today!) It was in rough shape. It didn’t seem to have any power and there was a huge gash on one side, like something had exploded out of it and depressurized it.

It was also tumbling, long end over long end, which was going to make this next part difficult.

“Okay Rock, hold on.” Grace said.

Rocky released a low clicking sound like he was blowing a raspberry. *“Bad Joke. Bad bad bad.”*

The last time the *Hail Mary* had spun, it was under less-than-ideal conditions. But if they wanted to get a good look at this thing they’d have to match it in velocity and spin.

Grace had done the math this time. *(He's not lazy.)* And he had asked Rocky to double check it. *(He's not stupid.)* Everything seemed right. It was going to be fine. Easy! No reason to worry.

Grace plugged in all the commands and carefully wrapped his hand around the joystick. "Gotta match it, to catch it!" he said, and hit 'commit' on the controls.

Rocky made another trumpeting raspberry sound.

As the *Hail Mary* started spinning Grace's stomach clenched. Was 'gotta match it, to catch it' going to be the last words out of his stupid mouth?

Their spin sped up to match Blip-M's and after a few moments of panic Grace's body adjusted to the force. It was manageable. Nothing like the tailspin that had nearly gotten them killed at Adrian.

"See, not so bad." Grace said, swiveling back towards Rocky.

"Little bad."

Grace wasn't sure if that was a concurrence or a rebuttal.

The *Hail Mary* was now rotating perfectly parallel to the blown-out mickey-mouse ship. Up close it almost seemed smaller. Was it for teeny-tiny aliens? There was no reason all intelligent life would be roughly human or Eridian sized.

Grace clamored down to the airlock to get a better look. "Do you think we could connect to it?"

"Why, question."

"You know, science."

"Not enough xenonite. Need to stop Blip M spin."

"Hmmmm," Grace mused, pulling his glasses on from where they dangled around his chin.

Through the port window, he had a good view of the rip in the Blip-M's hull. Some sort of glittering reddish substance, possibly a frozen liquid, coated the entire thing. It was thicker in some places and thinner in others, letting a greyish brown metal peek through. He could see a little of the interior, but it was too dark to make out anything other than a vaguely dendritic/fractal structure inside.

Maybe Rocky was having better luck. Sound wave based “sight” had its advantages over light-based sight, like seeing through walls. And the scanning equipment he had lugged aboard the *Hail Mary* was crazy-good.

“Well buddy, you getting anything interesting?”

Rocky made a high-pitched trill that Grace had come to learn was basically an Eridian “UHHHHHHHH” equivalent.

“What—” Grace started to turn towards Rocky when something just below the Blip M’s rupture caught his eye. There was writing on the hull. He blinked, and pulled his glasses up from around his chin. He pressed his face against the glass.

Partially buried under the frozen red gunk, but still clearly legible were Latin characters, and Arabic numerals. *Earth writing*.

The slightly raised black lettering on the ship’s hull read *SM-13.*

“Grace.” Rocky was waving his display doo-hickey at him, gesturing emphatically towards the ship. *“Grace, human shape. Human shape on Blip-M."*

“Oh my God.”

Grace’s heart leapt before it instantly crashed again. A Human, another human— a dead human. There’s no way anyone could survive in such a catastrophically depressurized vessel. And looking at it, it didn’t even look like a rocket. Was it a… submarine?

“Grace! Urgent, urgent, urgent. Human shape alive. Human shape has—” Rocky waved three of his arms pointing at Grace’s chest. “Human’s inside liquids moving!”

“What?!”

“Inside liquids moving! Only little moving!”

"Jesus Christ!” Grace scrambled to the EVA suits.

“What Grace doing. Question?”

“I’ve got to get over there! We’ve gotta—”

“Need to stop spin first!”

“Aghhh!”

Grace's brain was spinning. How the fuck were they going stop the *SM-13*'s spin. They had to figure it out and fast.

"How do we— Could we–" Grace picked up the EVA suit and put it back down "We could — No. We'd have to —" Graced picked up the suit again, pacing.

"Grace not making sense. Statement."

Grace dropped the EVA suit, finally finishing a thought. "Rocky, could we tie it to the *Hail Mary*? Attach it to us firmly enough that it would stop spinning when we do?"

"No." Rocky said almost immediately. *"Friction make both ships hit together. Both break. Bad, bad, bad."*

Grace slumped to the floor against the airlock. "What do we do?!"

"Stop Hail Mary spinning. Grace apply xenonite adhesive to outside of Hail Mary. We spin with Blip-M again. Slowly make contact. Ships connected. Maybe stay together." Rocky paused. "If not stay together, ships break."

Grace processed that. There was a chance. He might see another human again. An *alive* human.

"The hull around the cable faring is the thickest," he said, quickly jumping back to his feet. "If we connect there, there's a good chance that even if we don't stay stuck together, we can seal off that part of the ship."

"And not die. Yes yes yes!"

"Oh my God, okay. Oh God, okay! Yeah, yeah, yeah." Grace hauled himself back up to the control room as fast as he could. "Rocky, start on that adhesive I'll stop our spin!"

In all, it took them 40 minutes to stop the *Hail Mary*'s spin, make a xenonite adhesive plus an applicator, and get Grace into the EVA suit. (Getting Grace into the suit was 15 of those minutes. He hadn't done it in a while and there were a lot of moving pieces, okay!) It took Grace another 30 to space walk to the cable faring, apply the adhesive, and get back inside.

Grace cycled through the airlock and wriggled out of the suit as fast as he could. They had 20 minutes before the xenonite adhesive froze and became a useless artistic statement on the port side of the *Hail Mary*.

“Grace go faster. Statement."

“I’m trying!”

During his spacewalk, Grace had gotten a slightly better look at the inside of the *SM-13*. He hadn’t had much time for ogling, but he had been able to make out a human shape huddled inside the dendritic branch structures he had seen earlier.

Still hauling himself up the ladder Grace called out. “Mary, re-run the spin sequence from two hours ago!”

The ship beeped in response, and he heard various clicks and switches repeat the sequence he had programmed earlier. He pulled himself into the pilot seat and double checked that everything looked correct. (He didn’t want to accidently kill them all, that would be embarrassing.)

“Okay, Rocky—”

“Holding on."

Grace turned around and snorted. Rocky couldn’t hold on to anything in his bubble, but he had wedged himself into a corner. He looked like a perturbed pebble stuck in someone’s shoe.

"Here we go!”

The *Hail Mary* started spinning and slowly matched the *SM-13*. Grace could feel his breath catching in his throat and his heart hammering in his chest. There was a chance. There was one chance, and he couldn’t blow it. He just needed to make contact with the SM-13 and stick it to the adhesive he had applied to the hull.

“Like a fly in honey.” Grace whispered to himself. He swiveled around taking in all of the directional information the screens were giving him. “You’re not gonna like this, Mary.”

Grace eased pressure on to the joystick and the *Hail Mary* careened towards the *SM-13* with violent speed.

“AH!!!”

“Bad bad bad!!”

Proximity warning port side. 150 meters

“SLOW SLOW SLOW!”

“I KNOW!”

Proximity warning port side. 75 meters

“Mary! Mute proximity warning!”

Grace quickly corrected their trajectory and swallowed the taumoeba breakfast that had decided to make a return trip up his esophagus.

They eased closer and Grace shoved his glasses up over his eyes. He swiveled back to check the blip on the screen. They were practically on top of it, and he could see through the viewer that they were lined up to have the rupture in *SM-13*’s hull right above the airlock for easy retrieval.

“Rocky, can you see if their heart is still— If the human’s inside-liquids are still moving?”

Rocky shifted in his bubble to retrieve his device. *“Yes. Alive.”*

Grace fixed his eyes back on the screens. Scared to even blink during this last step. “We’re coming for you,” he murmured. “We’ve got you.” he pulled back on the joystick slowing the *Hail Mary*’s approach to barely a crawl. This needed to be as gentle as possible.

Grace was sweating like crazy. He would wipe his hands on his pants, but he didn’t want to let go of the controls for even a second.

The two ships made contact with a dull thunk and Grace held his breath. For five agonizing seconds neither he nor Rocky moved. Listening for the metallic screech or groan that would herald their demise.

“Not dead. Statement.”

“Not dead.” Grace agreed. “Mary, start modified spin down sequence one.”

The ship chirped acknowledgement and the *Hail Mary* started to pull out of its spin. Grace’s hand was still locked on the joystick but there was next-to-nothing he could do if something went wrong.

Slowly, the *Hail Mary* settled. A few stray Skittles floated up around the cockpit.

Grace craned his neck up to the displays. The *SM-13* was still attached, and aside from a few stray ice shards sloughing off the outer hull, it was still in one piece. He peeled his hand off the joystick and let go of the breath he had been holding.

He was afraid to ask. Afraid that after all that...

“Rocky—”

“Human same. Inside liquid still moving.” Rocky had rolled himself halfway out of the control room, his body angled down the ship towards the cable faring. Now that the two ships were touching, he could probably “see” it through the vibrations.

Grace let himself feel relieved for just a moment. “Okay, time for spacewalk number two.”

Chapter 2: Retrieval

Chapter Notes: I super know how airlocks work. Don't worry about it.

Grace shoved himself into the EVA suit as fast as he could without skipping steps or breaking anything. He started the airlock cycle and tripled-checked his lead.

Rocky was behind him, his body angled up at where the *SM-13* was adhered to the outer hull.

“Grace,” Rocky said, his tone in a low octave.

His heart sank. “What is it? Are they–?”

“Human still alive.” Rocky intoned quickly “Human is... different from Grace. Rocky not know if normal. Only met one human.”

“Well, we’ll know soon enough.”

The airlock’s inner door opened and Grace stepped through.

Maybe this human was a woman. Would those kinds of differences flag for Rocky? Or maybe this human was in some kind of suit that Rocky wouldn’t recognize? That would explain how they were still alive.

God, Grace hoped they were really still alive.

He swung himself up onto the ladder above the airlock. His helmet light and the hull’s lights cast dark shadows every time moved. Small flakes of ice drifted like flower petals in one of those Japanese music videos. One ice shard landed on his helmet visor and he brushed it away. It left a faint red smudge on his gray-white glove.

The radio inside Grace’s helmet crackled to life with Rocky on the other side. *“Grace be careful. Rocky only have one friend in space.”*

Grace clipped his lead to the top rung of the ladder and pulled himself carefully up onto the ragged surface of the submarine.

“Well,” he replied, catching his breath. “Maybe after this you’ll have two friends in space.”

Grace scaled the strange hull slowly, using the metal that puckered out along the rupture as a grip. He had tools clipped to his belt, but he wasn't sure which ones he would need. From what he had caught a glimpse of earlier, this stranger was semi-encased in something. He didn't know what it was, if it was what was keeping this person alive, if it was dangerous, if *it* was alive.

Grace reached the widest part of the rupture and peered inside.

The interior was a mess of slender branches, some of them woven around the human shape, while others seemed to have grafted themselves into the curved walls of the ship. There looked to be two types, lighter thicker ones that were mostly grouped around the human, and a web of thin deep crimson ones that carpeted the inner hull.

Grace pulled himself over the lip, careful not to puncture his suit on the jagged metal. There wasn't room to crawl fully inside, but he was able to half-perch/half-kneel on the outer edge.

"Hey Rock, will you keep an eye out? Let me know if anything I do changes this human's status?"

"Rocky watch."

"Thank you, buddy."

Grace reached in and pulled experimentally at the branches. They were solid, but there was some give. He couldn't feel any texture through the glove, but it looked rough and chalky like bark. He pulled a little harder, careful not to fling himself backward into space. The branch budged slightly rewarding him with a partial view of a hand.

It was a large hand, sturdy with some sort of fabric wrapped around the knuckles and wrist. Like the ship, it was frosted in a thin veil of red-tinged ice.

Grace reached in before his brain could catch up. His gloved fingers brushed the stranger's hand.

"Human's liquid moving more." Rocky's voice broke the spell, and Grace came back to his senses.

Grace pulled his hand back and squinted through the web of branches. He could make out some of a face. Dark hair and scruffy facial hair. The man's eyes were closed and his head lolled back.

“He seems unconscious. Is his liquid moving more or less than mine?” He asked, trying to determine if this was a dangerously fast heart rate spike.

“Less.”

From what he could see, he had two options; try and cut around the bulk of the branches and try to pull this man through the air lock with the encasement intact. Or, try and pull him out of the branches and get them through the airlock as fast as possible.

Grace tried to run his fingers through his hair in frustration and his hand bonked off his helmet.

"Glad new human unconscious.” Rocky chimed in. *“Embarrassing. Grace forget wearing helmet that keeps Grace alive in space.”*

"Okay, let’s stay focused please.”

Grace carefully unclipped a small ax from his hip and gently tapped the blade into one of the branches away from the main cluster.

“Liquid moving slower. Seems not good.”

Grace instinctively held his hands up. “Okay, sorry, sorry,” he said, more to the weird space dendrites than to Rocky or the strange man inside. He leaned in to see if he could see any changes. The man’s eyes were still closed, and he didn’t seem to have moved. Grace could feel his own face flushing. He was so *so* close. He was right there, but he didn’t know how to help.

Grace gave the branches another experimental tug. There was no way he’d be able pull them apart enough to get this man out.

“Rocky, get ready to hit the airlock for me.”

Grace braced himself with one hand on the ceiling and readied his ax. The plan was to cut as much as he could on the right side of the branch cocoon, pull the man through the opening, and then swing down to the air lock as fast as possible.

“Grace safe. Question?”

“Are you ready?”

There was a pause. *“Ready.”*

This was stupid, deeply unscientific, and undoubtedly dangerous thing to do… He was doing it anyway. He had to do it. He couldn't just leave this other human out here.

Grace looked through the branches to what he could see of this man's face. "I'm going to get you out of here." He took a long deep breath, "Okay," and brought down his ax hard, using the leverage his hand on the ceiling gave him.

The first hack went through smooth, coming in contact with the hard metal floor of the sub. The second hack sliced through a thicker branch and the ax came up covered in a thick red liquid that started to freeze almost immediately. Grace brought it down one more time and pulled hard, ripping open a hole big enough for him to reach his hands in. He tossed the ax out into space, it didn't matter, Rocky could make another ax.

He pushed his arms up to the shoulders into the opening and pulled hard. He had a good hold around the man's chest, and he came free easier than Grace had expected. He slid the man out and wrapped his arms around him. A few small branches were still stubbornly twisted around his limbs and torso, but Grace could pull those off after he got him stabilized.

"Now Rocky!"

"Hitting!"

Grace lugged himself quickly to the edge of the ruptured hull, (prayed he'd gauged the distance right) and hooked his foot around his lead.

1, 2, 3—

He leapt off the edge. The lead caught and swung him back down in an arc.

"Ah—Fudging Fudger—Ahh" This was such a bad idea.

He floundered, barely keeping his grip on the unconscious man. He tumbled into the open airlock headfirst. He wrapped an arm around a handhold in the airlock and pressed his body against the stranger to keep him from drifting away. He unclipped the lead and tossed it out the air lock. He'd come back for it later.

"Cycle it!"

"Cycle!"

The outer air lock closed, and the inner door started to slide aside. Grace scooped the man back up and pushed off the wall back into the *Hail Mary* and straight down toward the medical suite/dormitory level.

Rocky bounded behind them in his xenonite tube system.

He was grateful they were in zero-G, there was no way he'd have been able to carry this man in full gravity. The stranger was shorter than Grace was but much broader and more muscular.

"Is he still—" Grace started to ask.

"Only little."

From what Grace could tell he wasn't breathing, but he clung to the hope that there was still a chance.

"Please, please, please" he muttered.

Grace tore into the med-suite and strapped the man's unconscious body into one of the beds. He waved his arms at the inert med-bot.

"Armondo, medical emergency! Medical emergency! He–" Grace stumbled trying to think of how to explain the situation to the barely autonomous robot. "Resuscitate! Stabilize!"

Mercifully quick, the arms started to work, descending on the other man's body with sensors and IVs.

Life signs popped up on the small screen attached to the bed and Grace slumped in his suit. He let his inertia take him drifting backwards out of the way of the med-bot's precise movements. There was a heartbeat, so slow that at first Grace thought it was stopping and starting again. It was slow, so slow, but it seemed consistent.

"Grace okay. Question?" Rocky squatted in his xenonite tube overhead. His carapace tilted down towards the two humans below.

"I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"Rocky, okay. New human. Question?"

Grace surveyed the battered, frost-covered human. The med-bot had intubated him, and his chest had started to rise and fall in steady rhythm. He was missing an arm, and as the mechanical arm snipped away his clothes and the remaining branches it revealed more and more injuries.

“I don’t know.”

As the system warmed the stranger up, the frost melted. It was creating a zero-G pool of deep red viscous liquid along the fabric of the bed.

Was that... all blood? What the fuck had happened to this guy?

The robot arm started to work on cutting off the stranger’s patchwork pants and Grace quickly turned away, flushing. It was stupid, but it turned out years of solitude in space hadn’t lessened his sense of modesty.

“I should—go— I should get out of this suit.” He pushed off the wall to make his way to the ladder.

There were stray red droplets drifting through the air and he stopped at the base of the ladder to wipe one from his visor.

He froze. “Oh my God.”

He had done something so stupid. Monumentally stupid. Maybe the stupidest thing anyone in the history of being stupid, ever.”

“Oh my God.” He said again, his panic mounting.

He had brought another human of unknown origin onto his ship, scattered bio-hazards from the airlock to the dormitory, and had left every room of the ship completely unquarantined.

He looked up at Rocky, momentarily grief stricken that he may have doomed him too, but he quickly remembered that Rocky’s atmosphere was completely separate and it was exceedingly unlikely that any human germs could evolve quickly enough to do anything to an alien body anyway.

Thankfully, human germs would just be a human problem.

“Rocky, I’m so stupid.”

“Rocky know. Why Grace stupid this time?”

“I don’t know what germs this human might have, and now they’re all over the ship.”

Rocky mulled over this. *“Grace is stupid.”*

Grace dropped his head and let his helmet thunk against a ladder rung in frustration.

“How long human germs live. Question?”

Grace looked up. “It depends, and I have no way of knowing,”

“How long Human germs usually live. Question? Average.”

Grace rocked his head back and forth in thought. He had a doctorate in molecular biology, but epidemiology wasn’t exactly his specialty. “Uhhhhh…. on surfaces probably a few hours to a few days. Unless it’s a bacteria, then probably longer.”

“How long can Grace stay in suit. Question?”

Grace did some more ballpark math. He didn’t have a huge supply of tanked oxygen. He could usually just refill them with the *Hail Mary*’s main supply, but now that would contaminate them. “I think I have one full tank, and—” He checked the levels on the tank currently attached to his suit. “—a little under half of this one. I’d say ten or eleven hours.”

He twisted on the ladder to survey the medical suite and the robo-arm working tirelessly to clean and patch up the strange man he had brought it.

Rocky hummed with thought. *“Grace know how to kill germs. Question?”*

Grace ran through the available option. “Extreme heat or cold, but if there are germs on this guy they’d have to have been able to survive extreme temperatures out in space…. Uhhhh, alcohol or chemical disinfectants…?” He’d just have to work with any of the general chemical disinfectants he had left (he had drunk almost all the vodka from Ilyukhina’s personal effects.) He wracked his brain for other options. “Some need oxygen, but others don’t.”

There wasn’t anything he could think of that would completely sanitize the *Hail Mary*. “Nothing we can do would get rid of everything.” He mentally kicked himself. If he had just been more patient. If he had thought it through, he could have taken precautions.

“Rocky and Grace do as many as can.” Rocky said finally. “Grace clean ship, close this room, and run disinfectants in air while in suit. Rocky watch while new human sleep.”

Grace nodded slowly. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than not doing anything.

“Rocky sorry. Not think of germs either. Should have.” Rocky’s voice was in the low wilting octaves reserved for deep grief.

Grace looked back up at his friend. “Oh bud, no. You don’t have to apologize. This is *my* fault.”

Rocky quivered in his transparent casing, three of his claw hands clenched in tight fists. *“Rocky only have one friend in space. Should be careful.”*

He scaled the ladder to get closer to Rocky’s xenonite tube. “We can figure this out.” he said. “We’ll start with cleaning, and if I do end up getting sick —that doesn’t mean I’m a gone-er! We’ll just do some more science and I’ll get better.” Grace left out the fact that his immune system was probably near non-existent after years of isolation. They could deal with that when it came up.

Rocky swayed in his habitat tube, his fists relaxing at his sides. *“Grace clean.”* he said finally.

“Okay.” Grace hauled himself up the ladder and Rocky called after him.

“Good that Grace clean. New human judge Grace. Messy messy messy.”

Chapter 3: Decontamination

Chapter Notes: Scary blood? Space blood? It's more likely than you think.

Grace cleaned and sanitized as best he could. He quarantined the ventilation to the med-suite/dormitory level and ran a cocktail of alcohol-based chemicals from the lab through the HVAC system. He also cranked up the filtration system to catch as much of the gunk/alcohol as possible. Stray liquid was not ideal on a spaceship, so he hoped the filtration system would be able to catch most of it. He figured he could just toss the used filters out the airlock and plug in a replacement. Did he have replacement filters? This was supposed to be a one-way trip, there might not be any extras... Well, he'd just have to figure something out.

He also had to move fast, which was difficult in a clunky EVA suit, in zero-G. He was grateful he wasn't trying to do this in gravity; he was exhausted and there was no way he'd be able to get anything done in the heavy suit if he had to hold up its full weight.

Grace scrubbed down the floors and walls and ceiling of the corridor. He tried to catch as many of the floating red globules as he could in absorbent rags from the lab.

The low oxygen alert in Grace's suit chirped once. Time was up, this was as clean as it was going to get and that would have to be enough.

The filtration system had done all it could do, and the only thing left was to toss the filters out the airlock and get out of the suit. The alert was a 30-minute warning so there was no rush, well a little rush. But not terrible.

Grace carefully removed the filters and quickly sealed them in a vacuum tight bag along with the rags he had been using to scoop up floating contaminants.

"How's our guest doing, Rocky?" He asked over the comm.

"New human still sleep. Insides sound more like Grace now."

Okay, that was something at least. Over the comm Grace said, "Alright I'm almost done cleaning and then I'll have to get out of my suit."

"Then Grace sleep. Been too long. Grace come here so Rocky can watch both humans."

Grace was exhausted, but the thought of sleeping made his brain itch. He wanted to figure out more about this strange man and the *SM-13*. Maybe he could find a lead somewhere in the encyclopedic archive Stratt had uploaded to the *Hail Mary*. “I really need to—” he started.

“Grace sleep. Grace need not be more stupid than usual.”

“Ouch, okay.” He really wished Rocky’s memory was more selective. Namely he wished he would forget about all the screw-ups Grace had had while sleep deprived.

Grace cycled the air lock and stepped into the inner chamber. He tethered himself and waited for the outer door to open. This wouldn’t take long, he just needed to toss this bag and collect the tether that he had abandoned earlier.

The outer door opened and Grace’s brain reeled. They had still been traveling along their route towards Erid, just at 25 kilometers per second, no were near their usual speed, but in the nearly 11 hours since he last looked outside, they had come in visual range of something. On its own that wasn’t anything new. They passed by distant planets and moons fairly often. But below him, there was something, a planet? An asteroid? Probably a moon, but it was... wrong.

In the dark starless space around them Grace shouldn’t be able to see anything, but one moon stood apart from its black backdrop, glowing slightly. The deep red moon took up about a quarter Grace’s view out the airlock and it was... it was...

“Jesus Christ.” Grace breathed.

“Talking to Rocky. Question?”

“Take a look out the port side Rocky, there’s uh.” Grace’s mind raced. “There’s a weird... weird moon out here.”

“Rocky grab scanner”

The moon looked like it had exploded. It wasn’t round like celestial bodies were supposed to be. It was a ball of red glinting spikes and splashes. Like a giant space Jackson Pollock splatter. Debris and semi frozen globs of deep red drifted outward around it.

“Fuck what. Question? Weird weird weird.”

A cold sweat beaded all over Grace's skin and his stomach felt like it had fallen to his boots. Some deep, un-intellectual, non-scientific part of his brain was telling him to run. It looked like… blood.

Grace swallowed hard and tried to get a hold of himself. The closest bit of debris was thousands of kilometers away; he was well out of danger.

It's just weird, he told himself. Squishy human brains don't like weird. You just have to do this real quick and get back inside.

Grace tossed the vacuum-bagged filters out into space and watched them drift away into the darkness.

"Okay," Grace breathed.

He slowly, carefully swung himself up on to the ladder. It was just a half dozen rungs to the top where he had clipped the lead for the retrieval earlier.

The *SM-13* loomed above him a dark silhouette against the small lights that lined the *Hail Mary*'s exterior.

"Grace okay. Question?"

"All good, just grabbing the lead and then I'll be back inside."

The low oxygen warning on Grace's suit chirped again. He probably still had about 20 minutes but there was no reason to drag this out. He reached the top rung and carefully started to coil the loose lead so it wouldn't get tangled with the one connecting him to the inside of the airlock.

Hull Breach.

Grace jumped. It was an automated voice. It must be part of his suit. *Oh god had something been punctured? How??* He frantically checked his read outs on the suit's wrist display. Everything was normal, the display wasn't throwing up any visual warnings about a breach or decompression, and his lungs hadn't exploded.

Hull Breach.

"Rocky? Is that you?"

Hull Breach.

Grace looked up and nearly lost his footing on the ladder. There were dull red and green lights flickering inside the *SM-13*. He could see something inside flashing in time with the automated voice.

Hull Breach.

He shouldn't be able to hear anything out here, not from outside his suit. And how did the *SM-13* suddenly have power?

"Rocky?"

Hull Breach.

Grace's breath was coming in short, ragged gasps now.

"Rocky?! Come in. Can you see anything out here?!"

Hull Breach.

His legs were jelly and it felt like he had sweat enough that he'd have to start swimming around the suit.

Grace wanted to bolt but was a scientist. He should investigate. It was important to understand what's going on, particularly if it's attached to the *Hail Mary*.

Hull Breach.

Grace pulled himself up to peer into the *SM-13*'s interior. The flickering lights gave the branch structures an eerie illumination but everything inside was how he had left it. A few slivers of debris drifted around the empty space, disturbed by Grace's hacking earlier.

Lights on the front console flickered in and out. Numbers, (coordinates?) scrolled quickly on embedded displays. Some sort of navigation chart jittered with a triangle in the center. An orangey light on a speaker mounted near the ceiling flashed in time with the automated voice.

Hull Breach.

Grace tentatively lifted himself higher looking for whatever had caused the defunct submarine to come back online.

A glowing dot appeared on the navigational chart with a dull *blip* sound. It flickered slowly on the left side of the triangle, the *blip* repeating every time the light appeared and disappeared. Grace leaned in, pulling himself sideways, hand-over-hand towards the front of the sub.

Blip

Hull Breach.

Grace tried the comm again. “Rocky can you hear me?”

Blip

Hull Breach.

His comm delivered a burst of faint static.

“Rocky?”

Blip blip blip blip blipblipblipblipblip

The dot on the map was flashing rapidly. “What does that mean!?” He yelped.

A shadow fell over the *Hail Mary’s* exterior lights. Two silhouettes drifted out above him. Yellow uniforms, arms crossed over their chests. One of them had long pale hair that spilled out into a halo.

This wasn’t possible. Grace had committed their bodies to space lightyears away.

The light on the *SM-13*’s speaker flickered on and static warbled out.

“It— I—”

“Grace—”

It was Yao’s and Ilyukhina’s voices. It was their bodies, thin and in the clothes he had dressed them in.

Yao’s shoulder bumped the *SM-13*’s hull and his rigid body drifted, slowly spinning.

“It should— been—” His voice crackled over the speaker, cut by static.

This wasn’t possible.

Yao’s body slowly turned, his face dipping into the light. Grace’s breath caught in his throat. This was how he remembered them both, hollow cheeks and grey skeletal hands crossed over their chests.

Yao’s eyes snapped open.

“IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOU.” The speaker blasted.

Yao and Ilyukhina’s arms snatched out for purchase on the hull. They launched themselves down towards Grace, their fingers scrabbling, their bellies dragging.

Behind them, The *Hail Mary* was being enveloped by a thick crimson wave. The thick viscous liquid crashed over them and it hit Grace like a wall. It was in his suit and was quickly flooding into his helmet, choking him. It was thick as honey and feverishly warm, steam fogging the remaining inches of the inside of his visor.

Grace lost his hold of the hull and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Grace!? Grace okay. Question?” Rocky’s voice was blaring over his comm.

He reached the end of his tether, and he was suddenly pulled taut, his inertia snapping him back towards the ship. Grace opened his eyes, flailing to grab hold of something and escape.

The sky was empty, there was no crashing wave or any sign of Yao or Ilyukhina. The *SM-13* was dark inside, completely silent. His suit was empty aside from him and the sound of his rapid heartbeat. *“Grace okay. Question? Answer! Now now now!”*

Grace swiveled as far as he could in the suit, scanning every angle around him. There was nothing.

“Rocky, did you see them?!”

“Grace!”

“What was that?!”

“Rocky see Grace fall off hull. Grace okay. Question? Why fall?”

Grace flailed as his tether pulled taut and the inertia pulled him towards the hull.

“What do you mean!? They were—”

Grace hit the hull in an uncoordinated tumble but managed to grab on to the lip of the airlock’s open outer-door. He hauled himself inside huffing with the effort. “They— They were— I—”

“Grace need oxygen. Grace get inside. Now now now.”

Grace realized his suit’s low oxygen alert was chirping incessantly and urgently.

He cycled the airlock and collapsed on to the floor inside, he didn’t bother standing up and just pried the helmet off and let it float away down the corridor.

Grace took long deep breaths trying to calm his hammering heartbeat.

“Fuck wrong with Grace. Question?” He heard Rocky clattering in his xenonite tunnel system, fuming and chittering.

“Rocky—” he croaked.

“Grace fuck stupid. Question?! No not question. Grace fuck stupid statement.”

“Rock—"

Rocky was waving his appendages, alternating which of his five claw-hands were balled into tight angry fists. *“Human need oxygen. Or human die stupid! Rocky scared! Scared scared scared Grace die.”*

“I’m sorry.”

Rocky slumped down hard as near as he could get to Grace. *“Glad stupid Grace not die.”* he finished quietly.

“I’m also glad stupid Grace not die.”

After a beat Rocky lifted himself back up and gestured at Grace’s side. *“What that. Question?*

*”*Grace lifted his head to see what Rocky was talking about. There was something clipped to his belt. He sat up and pulled it onto his lap.

It was a life-vest, an honest-to-God, bright orange life vest. Like the ones you’d use for swimming on Earth. It had some sort of black box clipped into it. Grace looked up to Rocky, mouth agape. “I have no idea.”

Chapter 4: What's Two Plus Two?

Chapter Summary: Simon wakes up… and is super calm. Very relaxed and polite. (NOT)

They were traveling toward Erid again at top astrophage-powered speed. Which meant they had gravity again. It also meant that every second that passed was another ~269,813,212.2 meters closer to getting out of this astrophage pocket and being able to see the stars again. It also meant they were getting farther and farther away from that awful red moon.

Grace was glad that neither he nor Rocky had suggested they stay to study it. It was probably incredibly interesting, and maybe one-of-kind in the whole universe, but he never wanted to look at it ever again. They had the *Hail Mary's* scans, Rocky's scans, and whatever was in the life vest/black box combo that Grace had unceremoniously plunked into one of the bio-safety cabinets in the lab.

Grace wasn't exactly eager to crack it open and told himself it could wait until after the quarantine period was over. He had stashed the mysterious black box along with some samples of the branch structures and covered the cabinet under a black-out curtain in case light affected it for some reason. Unraveling the mystery (of what Grace had started mentally calling "stupid evil blood moon") was a problem for later.

Even after Rocky and Grace had exchanged their perspectives of what happened out on the hull, Grace was unnerved.

Grace had apparently just run out of oxygen and conked out pretty much immediately after leaving the airlock. The whole haunted submarine and undead crew thing was probably just apoxia induced hallucinations. Squishy human brains do weird things without oxygen. But neither of them was sure when he had gotten his hands on the life-vest with the black box. So that was… weird.

Regardless, they had lost time and needed to get to Erid to save Rocky's star. They also had two human mouths to feed now and limited supplies. The med-bot was pumping the new stranger full of the coma slurry and Grace was going to have to figure out how they were going to not starve to death later, but he was having a hard time worrying about that now.

He couldn't stop staring through the plexiglass quarantine wall at the man he'd dragged in from the *SM-13*. There was a human here. A real alive human. How? Aside from the weird branches, he had been directly exposed to open space.

Rocky was perched nearby, keeping careful watch on both his humans. Grace was supposed to be sleeping, but Rocky had been content thus far so long as he stayed mostly still.

The man on the other side of the plexiglass was riddled with scars and partially healed wounds. Armondo the med-bot had re-dressed him in a pair of *Hail Mary* crew uniform pants, but had left his upper half uncovered except for the mosaic of bandages that crisscrossed his chest and arms… arm.

Grace could see why Rocky had said this human looked different. He looked like he had been put through a blender. There were several grievous injuries. The missing arm was one of them. And besides that, half of his face looked like chewed bubble gum. But there was a smaller injury that put a pit in Grace's stomach. On his remaining wrist there was a raw red ring surrounded by yellowed bruises. He had been handcuffed or tied up at some point.

However, this man ended up in that blown-out sub, it wasn't his choice.

"Grace not sleeping."

Grace grimaced. He had been caught staying up past his bedtime again. Grace huffed and sat up. "Can't."

"Grace not comfortable. Question?"

He waved his hand dismissively. Grace was situated in a plush nest of pillows on the floor outside the med-suite and he was tucked comfortably into his favorite pilfered quilt. "No, no. I just—I just can't stop thinking. How the heck did he get out here Rocky? It took me 4 years to get to Tau Ceti, and it's been… however long that we've been traveling. How did he get out this far?"

Rocky's carapace clattered slightly as he thought. *"Humans make faster ships after Grace leave?"*

Grace huffed. "Maybe, but why didn't we see that ship? Why did we just find a— a *submarine* all on its own?"

"Coincidence. Fast ship somewhere else. Space big."

"Yeah. Yeah… space big." Grace chewed on the unsatisfactory explanation and his lower lip. He glanced back up through the plexiglass and gasped.

The man's eyes were wide open and fixed blearily towards him and Rocky.

“Oh my God.” Grace stood up tripping over the pile of bedding he was twisted up in.

The med-bot's automated voice announced. ***Eye movement detected.***

Yeah, Grace thought. *A little late.* His palms were suddenly sweaty, and he felt helpless on the other side of this wall. This isn’t how he wanted this to go.

The man’s eyes searched wildly, and his hand started clawing at the intubation tube.

What’s two plus two? The automated voice asked.

Oh god, it was doing the coma protocol. Grace waved his arms shouting “Computer, dismiss protocol. Stop! He’s not—”

Independent of the automated math quiz, the robot arm had descended and was trying to wrestle the man’s hand away to keep him from extubating himself.

Incorrect. What’s two plus two?

Armando, wasn’t intelligent. It didn't have the capability to adapt. The med system was reacting to the eye movement without factoring in that A.) the man was intubated, B.) He was not Grace or any of the other *Hail Mary* crew members, and C.) this was probably the most terrifying way to wake up ever.

Grace whipped around and shouted up. “Mary, dismiss quarantine protocol!” If there were germs, he was just going to have to deal with that later.

The ship chirped acknowledgement and Grace heard the vents and air filtration system redirect to reintegrate the medical suite back into the rest of the ship’s system. Grace spun back to the plexiglass barrier. “The door! Open the door, Mary!”

Grace was being dragged back through his own memory of waking-up here. Reliving how much he had wished someone would just tell him what was happening. How much he wished he hadn’t been alone.

“Open the door! Now! Please—”

Pressure reintegration in progress. Dormitory barrier will be lifted when process complete. The ship’s automated voice said pleasantly.

Grace watched in horror as the stranger managed to leverage himself on the robo-arm and use it to rip out the intubation tube. He spluttered blood and rolled off the bed. He slammed down into the floor hard.

Rocky was saying something, but Grace's brain was doing too many things to translate.

The man in the med suite had pulled himself under the bed and was managing to avoid Armondo's robo-arm for now.

Incorrect. What's two plus two?

The man spat blood again and rolled on to his back. "Four!" he growled, voice ragged.

Correct. What is the cube root of eight?

The man kicked up hard at the thick metal rods holding the bed up. "Fuck you."

Incorrect. What is the cube root of eight?

The bed collapsed and the man threw it off of himself at Armondo. He snatched up one of the support rods and started swinging.

His balance was off without his left arm, and he careened to the side crashing into one of the empty beds.

Physical distress detected, the computer said as the robo-arm gave chase.

Grace banged on the plexiglass. "Stop! Stop, it's okay!" he shouted.

The man's dark eyes snapped towards him, his arm lowered momentarily and Armondo took the opportunity to snatch at the man. He swung the metal rod again, and faltered, but managed to stay upright this time.

The ship's voice chimed in. ***Quarantine protocol lifted. Dormitory barrier disengaging.***

"Oh, thank God."

Grace stood back as the plexiglass barrier lifted and his eyes met the stranger's.

“Oh God.”

The man’s eyes were dark and wild. He ducked under the robot-arm and flung himself across the room towards Grace. The metal rod in his hand was already raised and swinging down at him.

Rocky barreled out in front of Grace and the man faltered for just a second, switching targets.

“Wait wait wait!” Grace yelped, throwing his hands out in front of him.

The robot arm swooped down and injected something into the wild man’s neck. The rod clattered out of his hand to the floor and he swiped at the injection site. He was already swaying, losing balance. His eyes were red-rimmed and blood-shot. Seething.

The man tried to take another step towards Grace but faltered, collapsing to the floor in a heap.

This isn’t how Grace had wanted this to go.

Grace managed to get the man back into one of the still in-tact beds and convinced the med-bot that its job was done once it had patched the stranger back up.

He guessed that he had a few hours before the man woke back up, and he needed a plan to make a better impression.

Grace had shared the beginning of his plan with Rocky, who was unconvinced.

“I know, I know!” Grace said, climbing the ladder.

“Dangerous. Stupid. Wait for new human to calm down then let human out.” Rocky was keeping pace in his tube system humming anxiously.

“Then he’ll feel like a prisoner.” Grace said “I don’t want him to wake up in there again. We need him to know he’s safe.”

“Grace needs to be safe.”

*“*I will be safe. I just need to make sure we’re in a room without any, like—sharp objects, or heavy objects, or... let’s just go with no objects.” Grace

pulled himself up into the ship's main corridor and looked around. "We'll talk. Once he knows he's safe—"

"Rocky tell Grace something."

Grace faltered. "Okay…"

"If Rocky bad alien. Grace dead."

"Phbbbt" Grace put his hands on his hips, incredulous. "If I was a bad alien, *you* would be dead!"

"No." Rocky said unconvinced. *"Grace catch Rocky tube. Could have been bomb or poison. Bad. Grace enter Rocky tunnel, could have been bad. Grace let Rocky into—"*

"Okay, okay I get it! But you weren't a bad— You didn't want to hurt me, and I didn't want to hurt you! I don't think *he* wants to hurt us either. He's just scared."

Rocky hummed unconvinced.

"Well, he's here now, we have to do something."

Rocky started a chittering note and Grace cut him off. "Something other than locking him in the med-suite indefinitely."

Rocky huffed and let out a string of annoyed clicks.

"Okay." Grace surveyed the *Hail Mary*. He needed a room that was isolated but that wouldn't feel confining. It needed to be easy to empty, and it needed to be… Grace mentally kicked himself. There was no way he was going to be able to lift the other man up the ladder now that they had gravity again.

This was a bad plan. He really did need sleep.

No time. Grace pivoted on his heel and headed back to the ladder. He had a med-suite to re-decorate.

Chapter 5: Live First

Chapter Summary: Grace and Simon finally properly meet. And we get to meet Simon's mom! Super normal not traumatic experiences at all. Good times all around.

Chapter Notes: My abuse of the comma and the em dash will not go unpunished. Nevertheless, I persist in my foul work.

Simon’s eyes were heavy and his throat felt raw. All of him felt like he had been dragged through a meat grinder and then plugged into a reactor.

All at once he remembered where he was and his eyes shot open. He tried to bolt up but was immediately slowed by a blooming pain in his chest.

He rolled to the side, expecting to tumble off an elevated bunk again, but instead he only found more solid surface. He scrambled up, taking in the thick layer of blankets he had been laid out on.

“Hey there.” There was a man with light hair and pale eyes sitting crisscross on the floor about three meters away from him. The man set a book aside and slid it under his knee.

He wasn’t separated by any sort of barrier anymore. It felt like a trap.

They were in a different room now. No, it was the same room, it had just been… re-decorated? All of the bunks, tables, everything had been removed and replaced with the pile of fabrics and pillows he had woken up on top of. Simon eyed the robot arms that loomed overhead. They would be difficult to avoid now that there was nowhere to take cover.

Whoever this guy was, he must have learned his lesson after Simon had improvised a weapon earlier.

Simon side-stepped to the edge of the room, keeping his captor in his line of sight.

The man was just staring at him. “I’m Grace,” he said with a placid smile on his face. “Well Dr. Ryland Grace, but we can keep it simple… I’m Grace.”

Simon ignored the meandering statement and scanned the perimeter of the room. Where was the *thing?* The rock thing in the ball that had been here before.

“That’s normally when you tell someone your name…” The man said. “At least where I’m from.”

“And where are you from?” Simon asked, still scanning the room. His voice came out ragged, barely more than a whisper. Whatever had been jammed in his throat had done some damage on the way out.

“I’m from California,” his captor answered chipperly.

“And where’s that?” Simon huffed out, trying to keep this potential hostile occupied without letting his guard down for the other. It had to be in here somewhere.

“Uhh North America… Earth?”

Simon scoffed. “Sure.”

There was some kind of weird tunnel system overhead, it looked like the same clear-ish stuff the thing’s ball had been made of.

His captor’s brow furrowed. “You don’t believe me?”

This guy must think he was really stupid.

"Where am I?” Simon asked. It was taking considerable effort to stay standing. He was fading fast and he needed to get out of this room.

“I— You’re on a ship called the *Hail Mary* we’re in the…” the man paused. “I don’t know what system we’re in. I haven’t checked in a while. But we’re on our way to a—”

“Why are you lying to me?”

“I’m not—”

“Earth? The *Hail Mary*?” Simon couldn’t believe the nerve of this guy. He hadn’t thought this looked like a Consolidation ship at first, but if anyone would try stupid tactics like this it was them. “Are you kidding? This doesn’t look like a 50-year-old ship to me.

"What?”

The pain in Simon’s chest was starting to mount. It felt like something was shredding him front to back. He was so fucked.

Why had the Consolidation pulled him out? How? Did he know something that they needed? He blinked away the surfacing images of the eel, the eye, the blood. Had the black box not made it to the surface? Had Ava lied to him. Were they always capable of pulling him out?

“What do you want from me?” Simon demanded. He tried to disguise his quickly diminishing strength as a casual lean against the wall.

“What—I… nothing!”

“Bullshit.” Simon tried to blink away the growing dots in his vision.

“I— we just *found* you! You were—”

His captor was standing now. When did he do that? Simon couldn’t let him get any closer.

“Stay back.” Simon pushed off the wall and stumbled away. His shoulder hit the back wall.

The other man stopped and held his hands up. He was talking quickly now. “We found a ship? It looked like a— a submarine? You were inside. You were hurt. We don’t want anything from you, we just wanted to help.”

Simon shook his head trying to clear it. “Who’s we?” he demanded.

“Just me, and one— one other person.”

Simon could feel his knees trying to buckle and he threw his forearm up against the wall to brace himself.

The other man was almost on him now. Simon couldn’t move fast enough to get away and he didn’t think he would be strong enough to fend him off either.

“Stay back!” Simon yelled.

“You’re hurt, please let me—” the man’s hands were outstretched.

“Don’t *touch me*!”

“You need to sit down.”

The other man’s voice was starting to sound distant. Simon's vision had shrunk to a pin hole.

He had to get away. There was no time.

“Don’t put me back down there.” Simon shouted, “I’ll fucking kill you all, every Consolidation motherfucker, if you try to put me back in that fucking sub!” Simon swiped blindly and was rewarded with an “oof” as his forearm collided with the soft muscle of his captor’s diaphragm.

Without the support of his arm on the wall though, he collapsed. His face hit the floor hard and the bright room was spinning.

His chest felt like it was tearing itself open. The room was suddenly so bright it was blinding. He couldn’t see anything. He was begging now. His hoarse voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere else.

“Don’t put me back. Don’t. Please. I did what you asked. That was the DEAL!” He tried to push himself up but only managed to drop himself back on the floor. Words tumbled out of him. “Please. Don’t put me back. Please —” Simon’s mouth stopped cooperating. He felt hands grab him, hard.

He managed one more “Don’t,” before it all gave way.

“Oh, don’t be like that Simon.”

His mother towered over him. Her gift felt too big, too volatile, in his small hands.

“Come here,” she said, kneeling down to his level. It felt like they were alone, even among the sea of other bodies that crowded around. All of Eden was pressed together at the base of the Last Tree.

“You are a brave boy. You’re my boy.” She said and pulled him in close. She wiped his face with her sleeve. “Come on now,” Her voice was gentle. “Big boys don’t cry.”

Simon nodded. Gulping his fear down. He was brave, he was her boy.

“Don’t be sad.” She tapped the gift in Simon’s hand. It was a black sheath, with a knife and vial of sun-eater tucked inside. “When you’re ready. When It’s your turn. I’ll meet you in the fount of trees. You’ll love it there.” Her voice was wistful, hopeful. “I’ll wait for you.”

Simon nodded, and something crossed his mother’s face, etching itself into the fine lines between her brows. “But don’t come too quick.” Her voice cut lower than it had before, like she was swallowing something too. “Grow up, get big and strong—” Her voice was barely a whisper now and she had ducked her head closer like she was afraid they’d be overheard. “*Live* first.”

Her glittering brown eyes searched his face for understanding. “Promise me,” she whispered urgently. “Don’t come too soon.”

Simon nodded and she sucked in a deep breath through her nose. “Okay,” she said “Okay.”

She pulled him to her chest and squeezed. The Father’s deep rumbling voice drifted over Simon as his mom pulled away.

He kept himself still.

He held his breath and bit the inside of his cheeks to stay quiet. He curled his toes in his shoes and willed his eyes to stop watering as she walked away to follow the dozen others who were making their way through the crowd up to the shuttle ship.

“Radiant light!” The Father sermonized. “The sun eater. The fire of the cherubim's sword, given to us to guard the tree. Radiant heat in the cold and dark. An end that becomes new life.”

Simon’s conviction wavered as he watched his mom’s dark hair disappear briefly behind someone’s body in the crowd. A whimper escaped his throat, and he bit down on his cheeks harder.

The Father continued, “Our brothers and sisters go forth and they will return. We will bring their bodies home, and they will live again when the last children of Eden return to the sacred grove. They baptize themselves in fire and smite the down Consolidation for their greed, their pride. We will bring them all home!”

His mother reappeared again, only briefly as she ducked inside the small ship. She didn’t look back.

The Father’s hands were outstretched now. Beckoning the crowd forward to gently brush their hands over the roots of the Last Tree.

“The Last Tree will live again. When the last Son of Eden joins the throne, there will be a fount of trees. When we die our bodies become the soil!”

Simon’s eyes opened slowly this time. He willed himself to move but he felt like he was made of gelatin, no bones or strength. He managed to loll his head to the side and catch a glimpse of his surroundings. He was still in the same room.

“Whoa, whoa” Simon’s captor appeared at his side. “You’re on a lot of pain meds right now— I’m not even sure how you’re awake— you need to stay still so you don’t hurt yourself.”

Simon grunted, trying to exert any remaining strength he had to sit up.

“No, no, please you’re safe. I promise.”

Simon felt hands on his chest pushing him back down.

Simon’s tongue felt like lead “Don’t—” he managed to mumble out.

The hands withdrew and Simon faltered in surprise. Whoever this guy was probably didn’t view him as a threat anymore. Why would he listen?

Simon tried to haul himself up, only managing to move his arm to partially hold his weight.

“If you’re going to sit up, can I at least help you?”

Simon paused, mind as slow as molasses. After a moment gentle hands pressed up against his back helping to lift him into a sitting position. Simon stiffened as he felt warm fingers against his bare skin. The warmth radiated in the gaps between the bandages that crisscrossed his torso.

“Here,” he heard his captor say. There was a shuffle of fabric. Simon could see the man in his blurry peripheries position a thick cushion behind him. “Lean back,” he said. The warm hands returned pressing lightly on Simon’s chest.

“Don’t—” Simon instinctively resisted the pressure and lifted his arm to push the other man away, but the hands were already retreating. Simon wavered a moment, unable to keep himself upright. He started to fall forward and the other man caught him. Simon opened his mouth to protest but the other man cut in.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry, I’ll let go— just”

He was helpless as he was repositioned backwards against the cushion. The hands pulled away quickly leaving a cold after-image where their warmth had been on his skin.

He was reclined now, but comfortably propped up. This was a weird fucking interrogation tactic.

Simon tried to blink the bleariness away and focus in on the other man’s face. It was the same man from before. What did he say his name was? Grace?

Grace hovered over Simon. His brow was scrunched over his blue eyes with concern. A pair of eyeglasses dangled around his chin. “Is that better?” he asked.

Simon studied the man. Trying to pull information into his sluggish brain. This Grace person was tall, probably a few inches taller than he was. He didn’t seem particularly muscled, but he didn’t seem weak either. Not that it mattered when Simon couldn’t even sit up, let alone fight back.

Apparently not content with the lack of response he was getting, Grace lowered himself down next to Simon, studying him back. “What do you need?” He asked.

Simon continued to glower, trying to cover his disorientation with obstinance.

Grace turned away leaning hard against the near-by wall. He let out a long breath and ran his fingers erratically through his hair. He looked as baffled as Simon felt.

There was a long silent moment before Grace turned back to him, speaking carefully and deliberately. “I— I know this is frightening. I know you have no reason to trust me. But I’m *not* going to put you back in that submarine.”

Sure... real convincing. Simon fought to get his vocal cords to cooperate. “What d’you want?” His question came out husky and slurred, but Grace seemed to understand.

“Nothing! I— nothing!”

Simon was in too much pain to have any more patience. He was done playing this game. He needed to know what else they could possibly take

from him. Whatever it was, whatever horrible thing awaited him, he just needed to know.

He pressed his knuckles into the ground in frustration. “Just tell me what you WANT!”

“I just want you to live!”

Chapter 6: Let's Talk/ Rocky and the Space Blobs

Chapter Summary: Grace and Rocky have different approaches to getting Simon to talk. One of them is more successful than the other.

Chapter Notes: Has your roommate ever brought a sopping wet, deeply unstable man into your apartment? You may be entitled to financial compensation.

“I just want you to *live*!” Grace threw up his hands in exasperation “Is that so wrong? Is that so hard to believe?!—” he lowered his hands and quieted his voice. It took enormous effort. “I just want you to stay alive, and I need you to just *sit still* so you don’t die.”

The man’s expression dissolved from roiling rage to bafflement. There was something else too though. Grace could see cogs spinning behind the man’s eyes. Something about that answer had stuck.

Grace swallowed. His mind was going a thousand-miles-a-minute trying to decipher this reaction and extrapolate how to proceed. He didn’t want to say the wrong thing and send them back to square one.

“How about a trade?” Grace started carefully. “You can ask any question you want. You can have anything you want—if I can give it to you, I will— if you just. Sit. Still." Grace had wanted to say *“if you just let me help you”* but those kinds of offers had not been received well thus far.

The man’s face flattened to a strategically blank expression, and Grace’s heart sunk. Square one was looking like a likely next destination. But then, the man nodded once, slowly.

“Okay!” Grace fought hard to keep the relief out of his voice. It had worked, though Grace wasn’t sure if he had worn this man down with his persistence, or if he had been tamed by what the Armondo the med-bot had diagnosed as an aortic tear, radiation poisoning, catastrophic blood loss, and a dozen other things.

“Okay, ask. Anything you’d like.”

The man stared at Grace for a long time, those gears still rumbling behind his dark eyes.

“Water.” He finally rasped.

“Yeah!” Grace practically leapt into the air. Water was easy. He could dispense water all day, recycle it and dispense it some more!

“Just a sec.” Grace hurried over to the compartments embedded in the wall and requested water from the med system. It obliged, producing a pouch with a straw.

Grace padded quickly back across the room and knelt back down with the water outstretched.

The man’s eyes looked at it hungrily, but he hesitated, his hand only half extended to take it. His eyes flitted back up to Grace, distrustful.

“You drink first,” he croaked.

Wow this guy had issues.

“Okay…” Grace had said that he could ask for anything, and cooperation took two. Grace popped the cap off and took a long sip. He made sure to exaggerate his swallow. He offered it to the stranger again. “Just water,” he said. “Well and some vital minerals but—” he mentally kicked himself. Now was not the time for technicality fun facts. “Just the normal ones!” he added quickly.

The other man eyed him dubiously but evidently decided it was worth the risk because he took a tentative sip, and then a gulp, and then another until he sucked the pouch dry. His eyes squeezed shut and the rest of his face went lax in relief.

Grace could feel himself gawking. There was a human here, and he was talking to him. Grace was feeling very normal about that. Very, very normal. And he was going to play this so cool and not make it weird at all.

“So, I didn’t catch your name. Mine’s Grace— In case you forgot—” He blurted.

The man side-eyed him. After a moment he just said, “Can I have another,” he held up the pouch. “Of this?” His voice was still hoarse and raspy, but it seemed to be getting better with use.

Grace briefly considered offering another trade. This man’s name for the water—but he was pretty sure withholding stuff like that for information was against the Geneva convention or something. He didn’t want to be the first human to do war crimes in space.

Grace's moment of hesitation must have been too long because almost simultaneously with his "Yeah, of cour—" he heard the stranger whisper. "Please."

It was not a casual plea.

"Yes," Grace repeated. "Yes! Of course!" Grace scrambled to retrieve another water pouch.

Once he had it, he held it out to the man who nudged it back towards Grace, nodding for him to drink first again. Grace obliged, making a show of taking a sip and swallowing. *Just water (and minerals). Super normal.*

He held the pouch back out and the man took it carefully. With his hand outstretched, Grace got a close-up look at the ring of fading bruises and abrasions on the man's wrist.

Grace amended his previous thought. It would seem the honor of being the first human to do war crimes in space had already been taken by someone else.

The stranger drank the second water-pouch even faster than the first.

"Better?" Grace asked.

"I have a question," he said, ignoring Grace's.

"Okay."

"Where's the... the thing? In the ball."

Rocky was one room over, watching them through the wall. But that was probably not a conversation they were ready for.

"Uh… He's in another part of the ship. It was my turn to watch you sleep." Grace bit his tongue. *That was such a weird thing to say. Oh Goddddd.*

"What?"

"OH! Oh no, that sounds creepy. It's an Eridian thing—" Grace panicked "That's what he is. The guy who was in the ball. He's an alien. It's a culture thing. Rocky—that's his name by the way—he insists on watching me sleep, and I watch him sleep, it—it's an evolution thing, they can't just wake up if something happens when they sleep so—" Grace was rambling trying to walk this conversation back to normal territory, but he could tell by the look on the other man's face he was only digging his hole deeper. "I don't just

watch *you* sleep. I watch Rocky sleep too!" He tried to loop back to the question. "He lives in the ball and these xenonite habitats because he needs a completely different atmosphere, um—" Grace pointed up at the tunnel system above them. "Mmm hhmm!"

The man followed Grace's gesture up to the Rocky's xenonite tunnels and then slowly looked back down at Grace.

They just stared at each other for a moment.

The man opened his mouth and closed it again, before finally saying. "You're not from the Consolidation, are you."

Grace let out a breath. "I don't know what that is, so I don't think so."

The man nodded once. He seemed to believe what Grace was saying, and he looked absolutely bewildered by it. He stared off blinking slowly.

"I'm still down here aren't I..." he murmured.

"What?"

The man looked back over towards Grace, but he didn't seem to fully focus on him. His eyes were wide and glazed.

"I thought I was done. Why am I not dead yet?" His eyes searched the room for something. He didn't say anything else for what felt like an eternity. Maybe those pain meds had kicked in again.

"Why don't you lie back down and try and get some more rest?" Grace suggested. Not encouraged by this turn.

After a moment the man nodded, and Grace adjusted the cushions and helped him lay back. The stranger didn't resist this time. He seemed far off, suddenly somewhere else.

Rocky watched the strange exchange between Grace and the new human. He was feeling decidedly outnumbered by the space blobs and didn't like the way this new human was acting. Based on Grace's reactions it didn't seem like normal human behavior either.

But per his earlier agreement with Grace, so long as the new human didn't do anything violent Rocky would stay one room over, so the new human had time to readjust. Which was stupid, stupid, stupid.

If they had found another Eridian out here, Rocky would have introduced them to Grace immediately. (And another Eridian definitely would have behaved themselves.)

The conversation between the two humans in the med-suite was picking up pace. Grace had retrieved one of the pouches of water and given it to the new human. Gross. Humans were always putting stuff in their mouths. Eating was a private matter, meant to be done only directly before sleeping and definitely not in front of someone you *just met!*

Rocky chirped quietly to himself in disgust. He loved his human space blob and had adjusted to all of Grace's oddities. This new human though…

Rocky clattered his carapace. He was not a fan.

First impressions are powerful, regardless of species. Grace's first impression had been bumbling, a little frustrating because of how long it took for him to pick up on pointing and language, but endearingly helpful and kind, and just… space blobby. He was like a little… there was nothing on Erid to compare with humans really, but he was just… a little guy! A really smart little space guy that Rocky got to hang out with, and get annoyed by, and annoy in return.

The new human's impression on the other claw, was not endearing. He had tried to hurt Grace, almost immediately. And according to Rocky's perfect memory, he had only answered one question since waking up.

The automated voice in the med bay had asked him "What's two plus two" and to his credit, the new human had answered correctly. Which seemed like a miracle, since if Grace had shown him anything, it was that humans avoided doing math in their heads at all costs.

Inside the room the conversation had stalled again.

"Why don't you lie back down and try and get some more rest?" Grace said, gently re-arranging the new human's position.

Great. Now they were going to have to keep watching this human sleep. All this human did was sleep.

Grace padded to the doorway and leaned inside to look at Rocky. "That felt like it went better," he said.

Rocky wiggled his body trying to approximate Grace's human "so-so" gesture. *"New human not answer any question."*

"Yeah," Grace sighed and leaned against the doorway. "He's definitely a hard nut to crack."

Rocky elected not to question that human phrase at this particular moment, but mentally filed it away for later.

"Not even new human name"

Grace was chewing the inside of his cheek, (weird human behavior) "Yeah, so maybe it didn't go *much* better but still— we talked?"

Rocky hummed noncommittally. He knew this was important to Grace. He knew what it was like to be alone without anyone from your species. Rocky at least was on his way home to his planet, and his mate, and his friends, but Grace would probably never see his planet again. He just wished, of all the space blobs they could have found, it could have at least been a nice one.

Grace leaned his head out around the doorway, looking back into the med-suite. The new human hadn't moved, but he kept looking.

Rocky stifled the urge to suggest they just patch up the new human's little ship and keep him out there glued to the hull. Grace wouldn't like that. Even if Rocky was mostly joking. Mostly.

"I just don't know what to do," Grace finally said.

Rocky arranged his legs and plunked down in his biosphere in begrudging acceptance. This new human was here to stay. *"Grace sleep. Rocky watch both."*

Grace was buried in a nest of cushions at one end of the med suite and Rocky had posted himself between him and the new human's slightly larger pile of cushions. He probably could be getting more done if he was in his tube habitat just above them, but he wanted to be in his biosphere in-case he needed to bulldoze somebody. (Not naming names, just prepared.)

He had a few small projects scattered at the base of his little ball and was alternating between re-tuning his light translator and experimenting with a new set-up for what Grace called his “hand-printer”. They had later decided it was more similar to a different human equivalent “knitting” but they had both learned each other’s word for printer first and that name had stuck.

The new human stirred slightly. He did this occasionally. Human blobs never seemed to completely settle when they slept. Which was probably why they had to do it so often. They were just not as good at sleeping as Eridians and Rocky couldn’t blame them for that.

Rocky went back to his hand knitting. He was hoping Adrian was still waiting for him because he had made his mate approximately 48 adornments on the journey home so far, and it would make the gifts really awkward if Adrian had a new mate.

He missed them so much, he felt like his shell was collapsing in on him sometimes. Sometimes he talked to Adrian quietly when Grace was asleep, imagining he was telling his mate about his day, and telling them how much he loved them, how much... how much he missed them.

The new human stirred again letting out a faint moan. He could hear the new human’s heart rate speeding up too. Rocky tucked his projects into the pouch slung around his carapace and rolled tentatively closer. Grace would probably want to be woken up, but he really needed to get some sleep or he was going to be so so stupid.

The new human’s mouth was moving, but sound was only coming out half the time. He still seemed to be asleep.

“..need you .t’.. be real...”

Grace did this sometimes too, he would thrash around and talk like he was being attacked from inside his head. Rocky wasn’t sure how to bring it up, so in those moments he would just roll his biosphere close and wait it out. A little of the heat that kept Rocky’s biosphere at Eridian standard, sapped out through the xenonite (no building material is perfect) and Grace had mentioned once that it felt like “a warm hug.” Regardless, the warmth seemed to help Grace a little. Maybe it would help this new human sleep more efficiently.

“.. please... “

Rocky bumped up to the edge of the blanket pile and tried to keep still, watching for any effect.

“i..see you…”

Rocky almost jumped back but the human’s eyes were still closed, and his head was turned away. Rocky didn’t know everything about humans, but he knew they definitely needed their eyes open to see.

“jus’… wanna live…”

Rocky relaxed slightly; this was just more weird space blob sleep talking. He eased closer, rolling his biosphere up over the lip of the blanket pile so he was just barely up against the new human’s side.

The mumbling stopped and after a few seconds the new human rolled slightly, leaning into the warmth.

Rocky studied the human. Up close, he wasn’t much different from Grace, minus the missing appendage. This human’s hair was longer, and his body was slightly wider rather than tall compared to Grace. But still, mostly the same.

There were weird ripples on his skin too, similar to the spot on Grace’s arm where Rocky had grabbed him after their ship nearly spun them both to death. Scars probably.

Rocky carefully settled and pulled out his hand-printing project again. The pattern he was working on was particularly finicky and he kept having to undo parts and redo them because he wasn’t paying enough attention and lost count of how many twists he had done. He was trying to spell Adrian’s name in an archaic but beautiful traditional notes script, but Adrian’s real Eridian name was long, longer than most, and it was getting really frustrating. Rocky was so engrossed in his project that he nearly didn’t notice that the new human’s eyelids had folded up. It was awake.

Rocky froze. The human wasn’t moving, but his head was tilted towards him, his whole body stiff. They were both just… staring at each other.

“Hello” Rocky hummed before realizing that the laptop with the automatic translator was shut off and probably in one of Grace’s mess piles somewhere. They were going to have to do this the hard way.

Rocky carefully lifted one of his five claws and waved it from side to side, mimicking the greeting that Grace had given him when they first met.

“Greetings space blob, please don’t act freak out.”

The human blinked slowly and lifted his arm and waved back. He cleared his throat (gross) and cautiously asked “You’re uh.. You're Rocky?” His voice was quiet and Rocky could see the inside of his throat had small abrasions.

Rocky tilted his body up and down in affirmation and knocked on his carapace for good measure.

“Yes, stupid space blob. Grace tell you this.”

Rocky didn’t bother singing his actual name. This human didn’t deserve it.

The human blinked slowly again. The rest of his body was still stiff. They were just staring at each other again.

Rocky could roll down the hall and see if he could find Grace’s laptop, but that would leave Grace unwatched and alone with the new human.

Rocky pulled the Adrian name project off of his hand printer and started sculpting something new. This had worked with Grace, why not try it with this new human.

Making little figurines for humans was way easier than making them for Eridians. Human’s little light-based eyeballs could only see the outside of the sculpture, so he didn’t have to bother shaping any of the internal structure.

He quickly fashioned a *Hail Mary* model, a human shape, and a model of the “submarine” the new human had arrived in.

He held up the latter two for the human to see and pulled the human figurine out of the hole in the submarine’s side. The human’s eyes widened at the submarine, but he didn’t say anything.

Rocky continued holding them both up for a moment, then picked up the *Hail Mary* model and put the human shape inside it.

The human still didn’t say anything, so he put them all down and started on little figurines of himself and Grace.

The human watched him work. And after a moment just said “You… you pulled me out of the sub.”

Rocky tilted his body up and down again but didn’t stop sculpting. “*Yes, Grace already tell stupid new human this also.”*

Rocky held up the first human shape, gave it a stick, and pointed at the new human to make sure he knew it was him. Then he held up the Grace figurine and the Rocky figurine, making sure the new human had time to parse who was who. After a moment Rocky wacked the Grace figurine with the new human's stick and pointed at him angrily. He balled his remaining claw into a fist and shook it. Grace wasn't here to stop him, and he wanted to make sure this human knew that his earlier behavior was unacceptable.

The new human flinched and averted his eyes. Rocky could hear his heart rate spike and for a moment the new human was just frozen. Maybe Rocky should have woken Grace up.

After a moment the new human licked his lips and said quietly, "Sorry."

Rocky lowered his arms and considered the human for a moment. This was better behavior. Maybe he was getting through to him.

Rocky put down the figures and relaxed his fist. The human finally lifted his gaze. His heart rate was still faster than it had been before.

"I didn't actually hit him with the pole, did I?" The human's hand fidgeted at his side. "I mean I know I punched him but— But you stopped me when I had the... I thought..." he trailed off.

"Yes. Fine. Technicality." Rocky lifted the figurines again and puppeted the new human trying to attack Grace, himself coming in between them, and then the new human unceremoniously tipping over. Rocky still pointed at the new human and shook his fist again for good measure. *"Still bad."*

The new human nodded. "Good." his heart rate slowed slightly "I mean, I'm still sorry! I... I didn't..." he looked back down, averting his gaze to the ground beside Rocky's biosphere. "I'm sorry," he said finally.

Rocky wasn't sure where to take this conversation now, so he just started unspooling the figurines so he could use the material later.

After a while the human's head turned and he watched the process silently. Rocky had unspooled the *Hail Mary* figure, and just started on the submarine before the human spoke again.

"Thank you," he said.

Rocky paused and tilted his carapace up. (He'd learned from experience with Grace that it helped humans know he was 'looking' at them.)

The human averted his eyes again, flinching away from the attention. “—for pulling me out.”

Rocky tilted his carapace once in his Eridian approximation of a nod and continued his work.

Eventually the human turned his head again to watch. They co-existed like that in silence for a while and Rocky thought the human might just go back to sleep until he opened his mouth again.

“Are you…” he started. The human winced but finished his question “Is this real?”

Rocky didn’t have a puppet for that.

“What kind of question is that? Is real?” Rocky intoned in disbelief. *“Yes is real.”*

The human obviously didn’t get any of that so Rocky begrudgingly set aside his unspooling and pushed his claw into the side of the biosphere. One panel of the biosphere had slight flexibility that allowed him to reach outside of it. He took care to move extra slowly so the human wouldn’t freak out and try and wack him with something. He extended his claw as far as it would go and waited.

The human leaned away at first, his eyes darting between Rocky’s carapace and his outstretched claw. Hesitantly, he lifted his hand and poked at it. He glanced back to Rocky as if for confirmation that that was what he was supposed to do. Rocky clacked his claw twice and reached a little farther.

“Give me your stupid hand!”

The human’s eyes went wide, and his mouth twisted in a weird shape, but he obediently held out his hand.

Rocky wrapped his claw around it and squeezed.

Grace had explained “Pinch me I’m dreaming” once after they had passed a particularly beautiful planet. (Beautiful to human eyes, it was just a regular old orb on Rocky’s read out.) So Rocky pinched his claw firmly around the human’s hand, just hard enough to hurt a little, and hoped the message got across.

The human stared at their entwined appendages, only pulling his hand back after Rocky relinquished it.

He cleared his throat (again gross). “Uhh, yeah” he said nodding. “Yeah, seems pretty real... thanks.”

Rocky went back to unspooling. *“You’re welcome, space blob,”*

Chapter 7: Better Behavior

Chapter Summary: Rocky did a good job and Simon almost gets what's going on now. Simon and Grace share their first meal.

Chapter Notes: I think maybe the gayest thing you can do is study another person like a bug in a jar. But that's just me.

Grace woke slowly, the med-suite ceiling coming into focus above him. He'd been an early riser on Earth but that didn't really mean anything in space. He had gotten into a habit of working until he dropped and just waking up when his body couldn't sleep anymore.

He could hear the regular clacking of Rocky's hand-printer and the dull thrum of the ship's systems. Space was quiet, something that had taken some getting used to. Grace rolled on to his side letting his eyes slide back closed.

Their new guest must still be unconscious since Rocky hadn't come over to wake him up. Grace wasn't sure what he was going to do when he regained consciousness. Their impressions of each other hadn't been great so far.

The clacking continued.

"Is it another ship?" He heard a husky voice ask.

"No is not ship. Is mate's name."

"Is it a... chain? Like for a gear?"

"Rocky not make it for new human. Stop guessing, what is."

Grace shot up, nearly hitting his head on the small ledge where the bunks had retracted into the wall.

The stranger was propped up on his cushions watching Rocky's claws at work with fascination. Rocky's ball was nestled in the blankets right next to him.

"You're awake," Grace spluttered.

The stranger looked up and Rocky put away his hand-printer. He rolled to the side to give the two humans a clear view of each other. Rocky pointed at

the stranger, curled his claw into a fist, and then gestured emphatically at Grace.

The man nodded at Rocky. “Right— right,” He looked at Grace. “I’m sorry— Sorry I punched you.”

Rocky hummed in satisfaction, *“Good.”*

Grace looked between Rocky and the stranger. “How long has he— how long have you been awake.”

The stranger gave a shrug and Rocky answered, *“3 hours, and 12 minutes”*

“Why didn’t you wake me up?!”

“Grace need sleep, Rocky have it under control.”

The man straightened up beside Rocky “Wait, can you understand it?— Them?”

Grace disentangled himself from his bedding. “Yes, yes I— oh shoot, let me grab the translator.”

It had been a while since Grace had needed the laptop to translate for him. “Rocky you should have woken me up!”

“New human fine. Grace fine. No problem.”

“Yeah, the new human is fine, but I could have grabbed the translator!”

“Simon.”

Rocky and Grace both turned to the stranger, and he shrunk away, suddenly finding the pattern on his blanket very interesting.

“My name is Simon,” he said. “You asked before.” He glanced briefly at Rocky before looking up at Grace. “Sorry, I didn’t answer.”

“It’s fine. I— Hi Simon…” Grace and Simon just stared at each other for a moment. “I’m… I’m gonna go grab the translator.”

Grace hightailed it out of the room.

Behind him he heard Rocky croon to Simon *“Good good good.”*

This was a massive shift from the reality Grace had been in when he went to bed. What did Rocky do? Grace felt a smile stretch across his face

remembering his own first meeting with the alien. Rocky was going to have to write a paper on first contact 101.

Grace dug through piles of detritus and devices for the laptop. Where had he put it?

“Dirty, dirty, dirty” Grace muttered under his breath. Rocky was right, but it was hard to stay motivated to clean when the probability of having guests was approximately zero. (When he first woke up in space Grace would have said the odds were *exactly* zero, but he had gained two surprise-roommates since then.)

Finally, he found the laptop shoved in a drawer in the lab. Apparently, Grace hadn’t used it since it had been stowed for the short-lived trip back to Earth.

Grace hurried back down towards the med-suite. He was trying to get the translation program booted while also avoiding running into walls, when something caught his eye near the airlock. He paused and felt his breath hitch in his throat.

There was a glistening crimson splotch on the wall just above the airlock doors. He must have missed it when he was cleaning up contaminants earlier.

Grace scrubbed his face with his hand, taking one step back towards the lab, and then aborting and turning back towards the ladder to the med-suite.

“Later.” He told himself. He had already broken quarantine with Simon and if there were germs he was just going to have to deal with that when it came up.

Grace shimmied down the ladder one handed. He could already hear Simon and Rocky chattering to each other. They seemed to be doing pretty well even without the translator.

“So, can you make anything out of that?” He heard Simon ask

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Mostly. Xenonite very malleable.”

"Is that—” Simon made a poor impression of Rocky’s humming affirmation. “Is that yes?”

Grace hoisted the laptop above his head in triumph as he entered the room “Okay!” he said. “The translator is all booted up.”

“Good. Good. Good. Rocky and Simon stop playing charades.” (Grace and Rocky had had a lot of time to kill in this leg of their journey and charades, and Eridian “□♪” had become favorites.)

Simon baulked briefly at the computerized voice.

Fair enough, Grace thought. It was one thing to know you were talking to an alien, it was another thing to suddenly understand what they were saying.

“Okay, first thing's first,” Grace set the laptop down and settled himself at the edge of the blanket pile.

What *was* first?

After a moment of the humans blinking at each other and Rocky’s carapace shifting quietly, Rocky chimed. *“Rocky bored, need other projects from habitat.”*

“Oh, okay—” Grace managed as Rocky rolled away.

“Rocky be right back.”

Rocky disappeared around the corner leaving Simon and Grace alone.

Grace cleared his throat. “So, how are you feeling?”

Simon picked at a thread on one of the blankets. “Fine,” he said. After a moment he added. “Thanks.”

The silence was almost oppressive before Simon broke it again. “What happened? I mean… how did you get me off of the moon?”

“We didn’t— you were” the pieces clicked into place in Grace’s head. “Your submarine was drifting around up here. Were you on that weird moon before? The red one with the… the…” Grace tried to pantomime the globules.

Grace noticed that Simon watched intently whenever Grace talked, like he was reading him. Grace brushed the exposed feeling his gaze evoked. It was probably just that Grace hadn’t made eye-contact in years. Not since he had been on the *Hail Mary*.

“I was in space?” Simon asked.

“Yeah. You and the submarine were just drifting around, thousands of kilometers from the moon. If we’re talking about the same one.”

Simon considered that.

This was making less and less sense the longer they talked. “How did you get out here?” Grace asked. “This far from Earth, I mean.”

“I’m not from Earth. I’m from—” Simon faltered briefly. He seemed to steel himself for something and finished “I’m from Eden.” Simon met Grace’s gaze. His expression was suddenly hard and blank. Like he was waiting for a blow.

“What’s Eden?”

A look of bafflement returned to Simon’s face. It was becoming a regular occurrence between them. “You’re shitting me.”

“I’m not! I don’t know where that is. Is it a planet?”

“It was a station.”

“Was?”

“It was a station near Mars, but then we—we left.”

Grace’s mind spun. According to Stratt, Earth was supposed to be in deep survival mode, how the fuck did they have the resources to build a space station? Let alone build one near *Mars*?!

“How long ago did you— When was the station built?”

“I— don’t know. I know I was born on the station, but I don’t remember it.”

Grace did some quick math trying to figure out how Grace’s compressed lightspeed-*Hail Mary* time would compare with stationary earth/solar system time. The math wasn’t math-ing. Grace didn’t think Simon was lying though.

Had Simon been generally forthcoming thus far? No. Was this a huge improvement? Yes.

Grace tested his luck. “Would you be willing to explain to me how um, 'Eden' left Earth? Maybe why, and when too? If you know.”

Simon’s expression closed, but then he shot a furtive glance in the direction Rocky had left and he nodded. “Yeah, I just— Is this really the *Hail Mary*?”

By the time Rocky rolled back into the med-suite Grace had gotten answers to about three of his questions… and now had about a million more.

Apparently, “Eden” was an offshoot of a big group of people who left Earth right after the *Hail Mary* launched. In the stories Simon was told, the *Hail Mary* had failed, or was always doomed to fail, and people decided they had to save themselves. They tried to get as far away from their Sun as possible, and try to find somewhere else to live. Simon had never seen Earth.

Grace gathered that at some point this big group of people fragmented and turned into “the Consolidation” and “Eden” but Simon was less forthcoming about those details.

Grace tried to find a reason why the relative time math wasn’t making sense. He asked if the humans who left Earth had used astrophage to travel, or some other means, but Simon just didn’t seem to know. He mentioned that the original big group once had something that “made space smaller,” but it could only take them, certain places and apparently had stopped working. So… that was something…

“Do you know how many people are in the…are in Eden and the Consolidation?”

“Two hundred, three hundred maybe.” Simon said. He was still answering Grace’s questions, but Grace could see that the longer this went, the less he was meeting Grace’s eyes.

“What new words. Question?” Rocky asked as he rolled noisily back into the room. He was hauling a horde of projects on top of his carapace.

Grace glanced over at Simon, who looked like he was about to throw up, pass out, or both.

“I think that’s enough for right now.”

Grace saw Simon’s white-knuckle grip on his blankets relax.

Rocky clicked exasperatedly “Have interesting conversation without Rocky, and now end when Rocky back.”

“Like you didn’t hear the whole thing.” Grace retorted. Rocky could probably hear a fly fart from a mile away.

“Would have liked to be involved.” Rocky pouted.

“Can I have water?” Simon asked suddenly. He was talking fast like he had been working up to asking for a while. “And maybe something to eat.” He winced. “Please? I answered your questions.”

“Oh my God, yes—” Grace had been so wrapped up in unraveling this interesting little puzzle that he had completely forgotten he was supposed to be taking care of a man who still seemed to think he was a hostage. “Yes, of course. That wasn’t a pre-requisite! Here!”

Grace retrieved two pouches of water and two of the remaining food packs from the wall compartments. They would eventually run out of real honest-to-God food, but that was a ways off. He didn’t want to feed Simon taumeoba as his first meal on the *Hail Mary*, and Grace didn’t want to explain why he wasn’t eating with him.

Grace plunked back down next to the blanket nest and handed Simon the breakfast. Simon took the parcels carefully but didn’t open them. His grip was tight like he was afraid they might disappear... or be taken away.

Grace paused, already lifting his helping of shelf-stable egg goo in a tortilla up to his mouth. “Do you want me to do it first? Like the water?”

Simon looked up. “No. I trust you. You—” The man seemed to be internally wrestling with something. “I don’t understand why you’re... why you’re doing this.”

Grace took a bite of his breakfast, hoping it would encourage Simon to do the same. The chewing also gave him time to think. General good-will was apparently not a concept that was clicking.

Grace swallowed and answered as casually as he could. “Selfish reasons.”

Simon’s eyes darted up. He was listening now.

Grace continued, trying to layer his voice with nonchalance. “I haven’t seen another human in years. Didn’t think I ever would. I just... think it would be nice to have you around.”

Simon blinked, mulling that answer for a moment. Slowly, he unwrapped his meal and started eating.

Rocky watched this exchange and shuddered. *“Humans look disgust when eat. Rocky go somewhere else.”*

Left alone again, Grace tried to think of something to fill the silence. He didn't want to overwhelm Simon with more questions, and he also didn't want to just jabber about whatever and accidentally open a can of worms.

Simon shifted slightly, pulling one of the blankets around his shoulders with a wince.

"Clothes!" Grace blurted, almost choking on his burrito. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry."

Simon was still only dressed in the pants that Armondo had put him. Grace propped his burrito against a cushion and rushed to where the med-system had stashed the clothes it had cut off of Simon.

The system had sanitized the fabric but they were in tatters.

Grace grimaced. He hoped they weren't sentimental.

He bundled them into his hands and carried them back to Simon. "I'm sorry," he said. "They're in pretty rough shape. I think I have clothes that will fit you, but if you want—"

A round glass medallion fell out of the bundle with a soft thump. Grace quickly picked it up from the blanket pile and held it out to Simon. It looked like it once had something between the two panes of glass, but one side was shattered and the medallion was empty now.

Simon took it slowly. His face had fallen back into strategic blankness but Grace could see him biting the inside of his cheek. He cradled the medallion in his hand, his thumb running along the outside edge. He took a sharp breath and set it down at Grace's feet. "Doesn't matter," he said in a hoarse whisper. Simon turned away and laid back down in his pile of blankets. "Thanks for the food."

Chapter 8: Where No One Has Gone Before

Chapter Summary: … what if they accidentally held hands? Maybe? What if??

The next few days passed fairly uneventfully. Grace and Simon danced around any topics that might lead to extended discussions about Earth or Eden, or how either of them had ended up out here.

It was made easier when Simon started to run a nasty fever and spent most of the last three days shivering or asleep. Grace had to trade several packages of cookies to convince Simon to let the med-bot examine him and treat him for an infection.

After all that though, with Armondo's help, Simon was healing remarkably fast. Even the worst swelling on his face had gone down and the only sign he had ever looked like a wad of bubblegum was some scarring and a slightly drooping eye on his left side.

With Simon stabilized, the time was spent easily. Grace did some more cleaning. He scrubbed the spot above the airlock and thoroughly checked every inch of the *Hail Mary* for any other contaminants. So far, he wasn't feeling sick, so he had to assume he had successfully managed to not kill himself with unknown human diseases. (Hurray!)

He and Rocky also had their one million other projects to work on. They had to keep themselves occupied, and hurtling through space was a very good way to collect data. Lots and lots of data.

Rocky had set up a long-distance telescope that Grace was lovingly calling the "Hubble Bubble." It was a round hyper-powerful sonar telescope, and it was mapping an insanely wide radius around them. Like, a bonkers wide radius. The Hubble Bubble was picking up the edges of Earth's solar system. Combining Rocky's Eridian tech and Grace's human tech had really let them both do some crazy stuff.

Grace was currently sitting on the floor of the med-suite, picking through some Hubble Bubble data and some of the images the *Hail Mary* had collected while he had still been in a coma. Grace was hoping to analyze up to present day by the time he made it to Erid, but that was looking pretty unlikely. There was a LOT of data.

Grace could tell that Simon was bored out of his mind, but so far he had kept to their agreement and stayed mostly sedentary. To keep him entertained, (and also to keep himself from going insane from wanting to ask Simon a million questions) Grace had taken to using a spare tablet to play some of the movies and TV shows Stratt had uploaded to the *Hail Mary*. He had also figured out how to convince the multi-million-dollar medical robot to hold up the tablet so they could watch without holding it.

They'd been burning through episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* for the last day or so.

Grace had avoided his old favorite at first, worried it might hit too close to home, but it was nice to get lost in the thrum of the warp drive and listen to the chatter of a full star ship. He could almost pretend he was on the *USS Enterprise*, instead of a three-man suicide-mission rocket.

Grace paused mid keystroke and looked up at Simon and Rocky. For the first time since Grace woke up from his coma, the *Hail Mary* had a full complement, the three crew-members it was supposed to have. That felt good for some reason.

Grace let himself soak in his companions. Simon was leaned against Rocky's biosphere, absorbing the warmth. His arm was crossed over his chest with his fingers tucked into the hem of his short sleeve shirt. Grace had lent him some of the shirts from his and Yao's personal effects, but they were all just a little snug.

Simon caught him looking and pointed at the screen. "So that one's a robot?" He asked dubiously. Grace slid his laptop off his lap and leaned over so he could see the show on the tablet. "Yeah, Lt. Commander Data, he's an android technically." Simon side-eyed him "Yeah, he's a robot." Grace conceded. "He's actually my favorite.

Simon eyed the med-robot holding the tablet aloft. "This one's not— you know alive… is it?"

Grace laughed. "No-no Armondo's just a very expensive… whatever it is. Not alive."

"Armondo?"

"Oh yeah, that's just what I call it. It's a joke, it was nice to pretend I had someone to talk to when it was just me here."

He could feel Simon studying him, and Grace cleared his throat. "What about you, Rock? What's your favorite character?"

Rocky didn’t look up from his project. *“Star Trek dumb. Bad fake science. Humans waste time talking about fake science.”* Rocky was still bitter about the let-down of learning that warp-speed wasn’t actually a thing.

“Come on Rock, you’ve got to have a favorite!”

Rocky adjusted his light translator (conspicuously pointed so he could watch the show). *“Rocky like Geordi. Geordi best character,”* he said curtly.

“Hmm… good pick. You’re kindred spirits! Engineers!” Grace lifted his fist in comradery. “What about you Simon?”

Simon was still studying Grace, his dark eyes prodding at him. At the question though, he turned his attention back to the screen.

“Worf.” He grunted.

Grace didn’t expect an explanation but waited for one anyway, just in case he might gain some insight into his mysterious new roommate.

When nothing further was offered, Grace scooted closer and settled back against the cushions next to Simon. He wasn’t getting anywhere with his data analysis; he might as well take a break and watch the show.

“Why Simon heart fast?” Rocky asked.

Grace looked over to see that Simon had gone rigid. He was still leaning on Rocky’s bio-sphere, but his eyes were wide, and his hand was clenched at his side.

“Oh!” Grace scooted back quickly.

They had touched before, but not since Simon had been really out of it. Grace had just gotten so used to being in the same space that he didn’t even consider they had been keeping their distance up to this point. “I didn’t mean to get so close—”

“No—” Simon’s hand shot out and gripped his wrist. Grace yelped in surprise and Simon immediately let go and wedged himself backward like he was trying to disappear into the cushions. “I’m sorry— sorry I grabbed you.” Simon crossed his arm over his chest averting his gaze. His chest heaved up and down with each breath. “You can sit there, I was just— surprised.”

Grace's heart was racing too. "No that's okay, I can sit over here."

Rocky turned in his ball studying the two of them *"What fuck happen. Question?"*

What fuck happen, indeed. Grace thought.

Grace looked to Simon, at a loss. "I— just got too close?"

"No," Simon's eyes were still averted. "No, I— you can sit here. I was just surprised."

"Are you sure?"

"I— want you to sit here." Simon uncrossed his arm and patted the blanket next to him. "Please." He still wasn't looking at him.

Grace slowly scooted back onto the blanket and folded his hands in his lap. "This okay?" he asked.

Simon was still bent away, not meeting Grace's eyes, but he gave a little nod and a gruff "Mmh hmm" before resuming his lean on Rocky's biosphere.

"Cool."

Cool. Cool cool cool. Grace tried to control his breathing. He could feel Rocky's attention on them both, and he really didn't need Rocky to ask him why *his* heart was going so fast too.

He tried to focus on the show. It was a good episode. Geordi had been captured by Romulans and was being brainwashed to kill his crew on the *Enterprise*. They were using the cybernetic implants he used to connect with his visor to get into his head. Grace vaguely wondered if that was another reason Rocky liked Geordi, they both 'saw' differently than their crewmates.

Grace knew why he liked Data. He had always struggled with the whole being a person thing. Mostly it was the social cues, and while he had mostly learned to cover it with humor… the feeling of not "getting it" lingered. It was nice to see the *Enterprise* crew just sort of accept Data's social blind spots. They seemed to enjoy guiding him through things like how to dance at a wedding, or how to tell when an insult is actually a friendly joke.

Grace's own lack of social acumen hadn't been a problem on the *Hail Mary* thus far. He and Rocky had needed to cut each other a lot of slack because

of the whole different species thing, and Rocky had no reference for what a normal human acted like anyway. But now there was another human here and Grace really didn't want to mess this up.

Grace stole a glance over at Simon, he had relaxed somewhat, but his hand was gripping the blanket like he was trying to keep himself from flying away. Grace shifted his weight trying to give him some more space. Simon's hand spasmed, like he was going to reach out for Grace again, but stopped himself.

Grace shifted back again and tried to casually put his own hand at his side. Did he just need to hold on to something?

The muscles in Simon's jaw were working, and his breaths were slow and shallow, but Grace just didn't know what to do. So, he pretended to watch the show and tried to inconspicuously watch Simon out of the corner of his eye.

Slowly, painfully slowly, Simon's hand released the blankets and settled beside Grace's. Their pinkies and the sides of their palms barely touched, but the contact was sending fireworks off in Grace's brain. He was touching another human. He was really here. He was real. He wasn't alone.

They stayed like that for the rest of the episode, and when the next one auto played, they still stayed there. Barely touching, just feeling the edges of each other's warmth.

Two episodes later Simon's breaths became deeper and slower and Grace stole another glance over at him.

He had fallen asleep draped over Rocky's biosphere, his hand still touching Grace's.

Grace tried to pull away, feeling strangely greedy for wanting to keep the contact.

He had barely started to shift his weight when Simon's hand twitched and his fingers curled over Grace's. Grace swallowed another yelp and glanced up. The other man was still fast asleep. The only change was a slight perturbed furrow of his brow, which relaxed as soon as Grace settled his weight back where it had been.

Grace nestled himself back in the pillows, willing his heart to stop ramming itself against his ribs.

Rocky leaned around Simon and tilted his carapace at Grace. The translator only had one volume setting but Rocky still prefaced his question with *“Whisper. Why humans behave weird now. Question?”*

Chapter 9: The Sub

What did you do Simon?

Simon’s chest ached and his head was pounding. It was hot. It was too hot. And no matter how deep he inhaled, his lungs were still hungry and burning.

Ava’s voice blared over the speaker. “Simon, I know what I said! It doesn't matter anymore!”

Did you drag her down to hell with you?

Her voice cut in and out. The signal was crackling and burbling. ***“—to finish the plan! You are the only one that can! Everything is—”*** Simon could hardly understand her, and the whispering outside was only clouding her words more.

“—That data needs to survive! If any of this is getting— Do you understand me?!”

Better than you deserve Butcher!

“Simon? Simon!”

Simon felt like his chest was caving in. Hope had been gnawing at his bones and holding him up, and now it was fading, he was disintegrating. He had done everything. *Everything* she asked.

But you can still redeem yourself.

“Do you have it?! Please tell me you have it! Simon, you have to go now! What are you waiting for?!”

“WE HAD A DEAL!” He shouted.

“NOT EVERYONE GETS TO BE SAVED!” Ava’s voice clipped loud and nearly unintelligible through the speaker.

Do the right thing.

He slammed his fist into the wall. He bit his cheeks trying to stifle a sob. “What are you talking about? You said you'd get me out of here! That was the DEAL!”

“SIMON, PLEASE! Simon! Please! Listen to me! It's worth it.”

Simon’s ears roared. Her words were a blur. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. It was over.

Ava’s voice forced its way back into his head***. “It— It is more than me!”*** She said. ***“It's more than you. It's bigger than— Please! The black box! It's in the crawlspace—”*** Ava’s voice disappeared again and blood cascaded out of the speaker, dribbling into the growing pool at his feet.

Why only you? Why you Simon? Why you? Our blood is on your hands. How. Many more bodies will you climb over to save yourself?

Simon's hands ached, his teeth ached, everything was wrong. It was too hot. It was too fucking hot.

Always thinking of the life you’ll never get back. Thinking of a mother who wouldn’t even recognize the killer she spawned. Or maybe she’d be proud. Is death the only thing she taught you?

He was brave. He was her boy.

We know more than enough, Butcher! The Light must be forgotten. This madness ends with you!!

Simon's head snapped up. “You think I'm just gonna give you what you want?! Fuck that and fuck you! You wanna eat me?! COME AND TRY!”

Blood splattered through the front port and Simon propelled himself back towards the access panel. He hoisted it open, only to be confronted by a bubbling pool.

"Oh, fuck me! Oh, fuck me! Fuck, fuck!”

The air was thick and metallic. It was hot. It was too hot. Simon splashed into the lower deck, and was buried chest deep. It felt like wading through honey, hot and sticky. It was so hot he couldn’t breathe.

“Fuck!”

Blood found its way into his mouth, into his lungs, inside of him. His hands fumbled blindly, his lungs burned, and he was starting to see spots. White flashes inside his head.

He had to pull it out! He couldn’t remember what it was. His hands were around it. He had to pull!

His head surfaced and he retched. Blood mixed with bile in his mouth. Acid, and metal, and salt.

He tossed the black box behind him. It was hot. It was so fucking hot. He tried to buckle the life vest over the black box. He needed it to reach the surface. There was something in it. Something that would help. He couldn't remember now. Everything was so hot.

His mother's gift. It bobbed in the blood in front of him. The old sheath was empty now, but it once held an old knife and Eden's gift of fire.

The Father's voice echoed in Simon's mind. *"The sun eater, the fire of the cherubim's sword"* Simon shook his head hard trying to banish the phantom sermon.

He fished the sheath from the churning blood and lashed it together with the life vest, securing the black box inside.

His mother's gift would protect it.

My blood burns, Simon!

Simon couldn't keep his balance. The flood crashing through the submarine and the blood in his eyes made it impossible to get his bearings.

Simon!

He careened to the side, his hand catching on the piping overhead. Pain coursed through his fingers and up his wrist. It was biting into him, worming into his veins.

He pulled and he felt his skin slough. His muscles stretched like glue. He was made of wet paper. He was melting. He was pulling apart. His arm snapped, and he splashed backwards into the water.

Numbly, he reached around and his fingers cupped the empty space under his shoulder. Warm blood, his blood, trickled onto his fingers.

He was burning. It was so hot. It was so so hot, but something inside of him forced him to keep moving. He reached out, fishing the black box out of the churning blood, keeping it floating on the surface.

His mother was around him. Her arms, she was too warm. It was too hot. *Promise me. Promise me you won't come too soon.*

Simon wrapped his fingers around the straps of the life vest rubbing his thumb along the textured surface of the sheath. "Please keep this safe, okay Mom?"

She was pleading with him, her eyes searching for understanding. *Promise me you'll live first.*

"It's more than me... It's more than me!"

It was too hot.

Hull breach.

He was boiling.

Hull breach.

He was melting.

Physical distress detected.

Simon gasped and threw himself off of the rock alien's bio-sphere. He had fallen asleep still leaning against its warmth.

He knew where he was now, but it didn't feel real. He couldn't pull himself out of the ocean.

His heart was pounding and he couldn't get his breaths to slow down. He was sucking in air, but he couldn't fill the hunger in his lungs. He was drenched in sweat and his borrowed clothes stuck to him. He was getting dragged down by the weight of the blood soaking his clothes. He could still smell the metal, he could still taste the salt. He was drowning in it.

There was a strange hum, almost musical and urgent.

It's the hull. It's collapsing!

Simon wrestled his arm back to grab hold of the collar of his shirt. He yelped as the movement stretched across his shoulders and pulled at the severed muscles of his missing arm. He had to get these clothes off. He was going to drown in it if he didn't. He tried to pull the shirt up over his head, but only managed to get it halfway before it smothered around his face. He was drowning.

"Simon!"

Something brushed across Simon's skin and he threw himself away. He scrambled, searching for purchase. He fumbled, still blind and soaked in blood.

It grabbed him and the shirt pulled away up over his head.
“Simon! Simon it’s okay.” Grace was standing over him with the shirt in hand.

The urgent hum repeated. *“Simon safe. Statement. Stop act like freak out.”* Rocky’s musical voice, and the computer translation washed over him. It wasn’t the hull collapsing. Simon swiped a hand over his face trying to wipe the blood away, but it came away clean.

“Not helpful, Rock.” Grace knelt down and pushed the tangled damp strands of Simon’s hair out of his face. It was plastered to his cheeks, his forehead, it was wrapped around his neck.

Simon’s breaths were still heaving in his chest.

Grace knelt back on his heels, his blue eyes wide with concern. “I’ll get you some new clothes.” Grace started to stand up but Simon’s hand shot out before he could stop it. He felt Grace flinch under his grasp, but Simon couldn’t pry his hand open. He needed the tether. He needed Grace to pull him out.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Simon gasped. He felt blind still. The room was bright, but he couldn’t blink away the red veil over his vision. There was no blood, but he could *feel* it.

Simon felt Grace’s other arm curl around his shoulders and pull him forward. Simon’s face fell into the crook of Grace’s neck and he collapsed into him. His hand was still gripping Grace’s wrist. He couldn’t let go.

He could feel the vibrations in Grace’s chest, he was saying something, but he couldn’t hear the words. Just the low thrum of it.

Simon's ragged breaths finally started to fill his lungs, and the room swam into focus. Grace was still wrapped around him. Simon was half laying, half kneeling almost all of his weight was in Grace’s lap.

He forced himself to relinquish the other man’s wrists and pushed himself away. “I’m sorry,” he gasped out. “I grabbed you, I shouldn’t have—” He sucked in another breath ‘—I shouldn’t have grabbed you.”

Rocky was chittering again. Simon couldn’t understand it, and he couldn’t hear the laptop’s translation properly.

Grace seemed at a loss, his hands still partially outstretched, frozen from where Simon had broken away.

“Are you alright?” Grace asked breathlessly. “What happened—*ack*, Armondo!” The robot arm had descended. “Dismiss! Stop!— no!” The robot arm lifted an appendage. ***Physical distress detected.***

Grace pressed his shoulder against the robot arm and pushed it away like it was a stubborn animal. “We’re still all good here.” He grunted. The mechanism whirred slightly against Grace's weight but eventually acquiesced and folded itself up.

Grace plopped back down in front of Simon, wrestling his glasses from where they had tangled around his shirt collar. “Wait— there we go— What happened?”

“Simon sleep bad bad bad, incorrectly. See Grace do this before.”

“Just—Rock, hold on.” Grace waved a hand shushing Rocky. “Simon, what do you need?”

Simon’s mind was blank and buzzing. He needed Grace’s attention off of him.

“Do you maybe need some water?” Grace suggested

Simon nodded, grasping at a concept he could understand right now.

Grace disappeared, then reappeared with a water pouch. He popped the lid and gently pressed it into Simon’s hand.

The more he came to his senses the more Simon’s cheeks burned. “I’m fine. Don’t—”

He wanted to tell them both not to look at him, but if they left, if they left the room and it turned out they weren’t real, if they didn’t come back. “Can you just— Can you just keep talking to me?”

What would be the point? You’ll just run out of air faster.

“Y—yeah,” Grace said, scooting tentatively closer. “I’m great at talking. Actually, most people would tell you I’m bad at knowing when to *stop* talking!” He let out a huffy nervous laugh. “Uh— uh… what do you want to talk about?”

Simon opened his mouth, but he couldn’t cram anything coherent through it. “I — just—”

“No worries,” Grace waved his hands, dismissing his question. “I’ll just—how about uh…”

Rocky chirped, “Eridians better at sleep than humans.”

Grace laughed “Fair enough, that’s actually really fascinating though. Humans need sleep to sorta de-frag our brains and store memories. We have REM, which—” Grace laughed again. “Eridians can’t have rapid *eye* movement for obvious reasons. But you guys still sleep.”

“Eridians sleep to digest. Heal.”

“Is there any cognitive component?”

Simon let their chatter wash over him. Everyday, he became more convinced that this must be real because there’s no way his mind could come up with something this weird.

“Not understand. Need word.”

“Cognitive? Oh geeze, uhhh… like thinking,” Grace tapped the side of his head. “—like related to thinking, or being able to think.”

“No, Eridians not think while sleep.” Rocky’s tone gave Simon the impression that Rocky thought that would be insane. *“Wait, Human’s think while sleep. Question?!”*

“Uhhh kinda? Not like real thinking. Our brains sort of fire off randomly, so we see, and hear, and feel stuff while our neurons file stuff away in long-term memory.”

Rocky was quiet for a moment, his carapace vibrating. “Rocky understand why human memory so bad now. Because human brain try to do important work while turned off.”

Chapter 10: The Stars

Chapter Summary: Simon gets to go on a field trip up the ladder! (Hey remember how the lowest deck on the Hail Mary doesn't have any windows so Grace didn't know he was in space until he went up the ladder and saw the stars?) Hmmm....

Simon seemed to have calmed down, and Grace's own heart had stopped trying to beat itself out of his chest.

He had suggested they watch a show for lack of a better idea, and they had settled back into the blanket mound. Grace hadn't wanted to risk bringing Armondo down to hold the tablet again, so he was sitting shoulder to shoulder with Simon with it resting in his lap. Rocky had wandered off to work on something in the lab, leaving them alone. Grace would probably need to apologize for how he had said he wasn't helping. This was all confusing for Grace, he couldn't imagine the learning curve for Rocky.

Simon hadn't put himself back under the covers and Grace wasn't going to push it. His sweat soaked shirt was still discarded nearby. While Grace didn't know what happened, he could guess that overheating against Rocky's biosphere had contributed somehow. That didn't make it less distracting. Simon was bare from the waist up aside from the patchwork of bandages and he... Grace's brain wasn't letting him even come up with the right words. Simon was... very attractive, and quite... fit. This was of course deeply inappropriate, and he was tamping down all of the stray thoughts that wandered in, but it didn't help that Simon's arm (thicker than Grace's thigh) was brushing up against his own.

Grace could barely focus on the show. It was a holodeck episode and Simon seemed at least to be passively paying attention, but Grace kept seeing him scan the room, still on edge. Some big commotion drew both of their attention back to the screen. It was the Moriarty episode. Data and Geordi had accidently instructed the *Enterprise* computer to make a sentient Moriarty for their murder mystery adventure, and hijinks ensued.

Simon gestured to the screen. "Bet having one of those would be cool."

Conversation was a good sign.

"Yeah," Grace agreed. "A holodeck would make being cooped up a little easier."

Simon nodded and Grace tried to think of something to keep him talking. The silence was driving him crazy, but he didn't want to lead with 'so, you wig out in your sleep too?' or 'why did you sound like you were drowning in your sleep, does it have to do with the submarine glued to our hull' or 'can I squeeze your bicep, for totally not weird reasons?'

"Wait! We kind of do have a holodeck!" Grace exclaimed. It must have come out too loud because Simon flinched away.

"Sorry, sorry. But we do have one. It's only audio and video, and it's much smaller but—" Grace paused the show already getting excited. "Do you think you could handle a ladder? We can take it slow."

Simon blinked at him.

"We don't have to!" Grace added quickly. Simon was already standing up "Why the fuck wouldn't I want to see a holodeck?"

"Wait! Let me help you up."

"I'm fine," Simon grunted.

Despite Simon's protests, he begrudgingly let Grace take his arm and let him lead the way to the ladder.

This was such a good idea. Simon could see some more of the ship, the exercise would probably help clear his head, and maybe this would help build some trust between them!

This was such a bad idea. They had made it up the ladder, but it had been a battle. Simon was refusing any help, and he was getting pale. "We'll just take a break here." Grace said, trying to keep his voice casual and not trigger another round of 'I'm fine's' from this insanely stubborn man.

Simon grunted an affirmation, but otherwise didn't respond. He was laying on his back; his fingers curled around the metal grate lattice that made up the floor. His chest heaved up and down and his hair was sticking to the sweat beading on his face and neck.

Grace winced. "Sorry, I shouldn't have suggested this."

Simon hauled himself into a sitting position. “No, I want to see it—” He froze mid-sentence, staring at something past Grace.

“What?” Grace followed his gaze. Stars glittered distantly out the cupola window. Everything looked normal.

“Are those... *real*?"

“Y-yeah? The stars you mean?”

Simon pushed himself to his knees, his eyes wide with disbelief. He was frozen, mouthing half-audible words. He wasn’t talking to Grace. He seemed to have forgotten Grace was there. “They were ghost light. They were...” Simon stood slowly. He moved like he was sleepwalking. “They were gone.”

Grace watched Simon approach the window like it was a wild animal. Like he was afraid it might dart away.

Simon’s eyes searched the sky that surrounded them with equal fear and hunger. His hand trembled where it reached out to grip the edge of the window,

Grace wasn’t sure what this was, or what this reaction to the view outside meant. He wanted to reach out and touch Simon, to try and break the spell and calm him down, but this moment felt private somehow. It was like Grace was eavesdropping on some kind of reunion. If Grace broke the silence, Simon might shatter.

Instead, Grace counted both of their breaths and waited.

1, 2, 3...

34, 35, 36...

57, 58, 59...

79, 80, 81...

After a hundred, Simon broke his vigil at the window and turned back to face Grace. His eyes were ducked down to the floor, red rimmed and glassy. In a slow almost robotic motion, he pressed his fist down on the windows metal frame like he was expelling something from it.

Finally, he looked up at Grace, his voice was broken and quiet. “Have they... been out here the whole time?”

Grace’s hands spasmed at his sides. He wanted to pull him into a hug, do *something*! He wanted to force Simon to tell him everything, so he could fix it.

Instead, kept his hands still and asked. “If I showed you a navigation chart, do you think you could show me where Eden is?”

Chapter 11: The Holodeck

Chapter Summary: Simon finds out where all the stars and planets disappeared to.

Chapter Notes: I just want to say thank you for reading! This is my first fic, and all of your kind comments have made my day! Okay byeeeeee

Simon had seen stars before, or at least he had seen their ghosts. When he was young, they glimmered faintly through the glass ceiling over the Last Tree. They had faded as he aged, until all he could see was inky blackness dotted with a few distant hold-outs.

The stars were going out and they'd soon be gone. That was a fact of life. That was a truth that guided everything Eden did, everything the Consolidation did, everything he had done.

And here they were. They were so bright, and more beautiful than he ever could have fucking imagined. Even in his wildest dreams he wouldn't have put so many in the sky. He wanted to throw himself at the window and smash it to pieces. He wanted to scream at them. He wanted to ask where the fuck they had been when he was still praying that they'd come back.

Instead, he just pressed his knuckles hard into the metal frame of the window and tried to keep his voice steady. "Have they been out here the whole time?"

Grace was stock still, his blue eyes studying him. "If I showed you a navigation chart, do you think you could show me where Eden is?"

Simon just nodded and let Grace pull him gently away from the window. So gentle. Everything here was so fucking gentle, and it only reminded him how ill-suited he was to be here.

He was going to ruin this, and the universe would wake up and put him back where he belonged soon.

Grace led him to a small room with curved walls and a grated floor. As they entered, the walls came to life one at a time, lighting up in a staggered pattern. They briefly flashed numbers before coalescing to create a scene. A dull roar filled the little room and blue water lapped under his feet.

Simon gasped and stumbled backwards. Grace had to catch him under the arm.

Even seeing the grate floor under his feet and feeling Grace's warm hand, he felt like he was floating. It was like the walls had disappeared. He had never been anywhere without walls. He had always been on a station, or a ship. Walls had always pressed in on him, separating him from the vast emptiness outside. Walls kept him safe. They meant he wasn't floating out there with the dead stars.

"Sorry!" Grace said hurriedly. "This is just what I had it on last time. Let me pull up the star charts."

Simon felt Grace pull away and resisted the urge to grab hold of him again.

"It's an ocean," Simon said numbly. The water's dull roar was worming its way into him.

"Yeah, it's a beach near where I used to live." Grace was fiddling with a laptop propped up at the corner of the room.

Simon's eyes adjusted and he could see the lights that made up the screens, but he couldn't shake the feeling of being exposed. The missing walls, the missing boundaries that usually separated him from the open, made his hair stand on end.

"There we go." Grace said, and the beach disappeared. It was replaced by a map.

Labeled white dots were scattered around him on black background. Grace stood up and dragged a hand down the wall pulling the map around. He swiped his hand in a few directions demonstrating how to move through the illustrated stars. "We found you around, here." Grace said zooming in on a section. He gestured for Simon to take over. "You steer."

It took Simon a moment to get his bearings. He swiped his way around until he found what he was looking for. Familiar planets, Mars, Jupiter, he scrolled past Pluto, through the Kuiper belt, until he found home. There were labeled stars on this section of the map, but they were all outlined in red.

"Here." Simon pointed to the system labeled WISE 0855-0714. "We're in orbit around here."

Grace clicked on the laptop and dropped a new note into the map. *Eden.* He took a long careful breath and pointed at the red marks scattered around room.

“So, all of these stars are infected and fading. WISE 0855-0714 and all of these—” Grace gestured to the collection of crimson color-coded dots. “have been infected much longer than Earth’s sun, Sol. I think…” Grace paused. “You told me that the people who left Earth were trying to get away from our dying sun, to find a safer place to live. I think... they were unlucky and went straight into where the astrophage was already doing massive damage and… well, astrophage absorbs light.” He held out his hands helplessly. “This is just a theory, but it’s what I saw when we were passing through the edge of it. If it gets thick enough... it might make it seem like *all* the stars, not just the infected stars, dimmed and disappeared, because the light was getting absorbed before it could get to you.”

Simon didn’t realize he was on the ground until Grace was clambering to his side. He could hear himself laughing. It was a strange weeping wheezing sound, and it felt like he was shaking apart.

“They were there the whole time.” Simon pulled his legs up to his chest and buried his face in his arm. “We should have known,” He laughed into his elbow, his shoulders heaving. “I mean what's more likely? That every planet and star disappeared? Or we were just—” His chest ached and his eyes burned. “We were just under a fucking blanket convinced the whole fucking universe died!”

His laughing fit was spluttering out, and he didn’t like what it was turning into. “Who turned out the fucking lights!?” His laugh crumbled and the sounds he was making were bouncing off the walls back to him. He sounded like a dying animal. He sounded like he was being torn apart.

He was vaguely aware of Grace’s hands on his shoulders. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know— If I had known— I would have told you sooner. I—”

Simon tried to clamp his mouth shut and pull himself together. All he had done was show this man how weak he was, since the moment he woke up here. The horrible sounds were still pouring out of him, only now they were stuck in his throat, choking him. He was gagging on them, gasping when Grace pulled him into himself. Grace wrapping his arms around Simon. Simon couldn’t stop the sounds pouring out of his body. Tremors wracked through him and he sobbed into Grace’s neck, unable to pull away.

Everything, *everything* he had done was pointless. Everything The Father had asked him to do, made him do. Everything he had done willingly.

Everything the Consolidation trapped him into. If they had all just *swiped* a little farther on the map, if they had just parked around any other star—

None of it fucking meant anything.

The animal inside Simon finally died and its horrible sounds stopped pushing their way out of him. He was left shuddering and cold.

Grace was still holding him. Selfishly, stupidly, Simon let him.“

I’m so sorry,” Grace whispered.

Finally, mercifully, Grace pulled away. Simon was vaguely aware that he was leaving the room, that he was going to go grab their bedding so Simon wouldn’t have to repeat the trip down the ladder, but Simon’s mind felt hollow. He could almost feel his thoughts rattling around the edges of his head and flickering out. His face hurt.

Simon wiped his face on his sleeve. “Fuck me.”

How many more times was he going to need to be rescued by this insultingly gentle man. He probably thought Simon was so fucking stupid.

As if summoned by Simon’s thoughts, Grace reappeared, his arms loaded with a bundle of blankets and cushions.

“Sorry,” Simon mumbled.

Grace’s brow furrowed as he set down the jumble. “For what?”

Simon couldn’t bear his eyes on him again. He gestured vaguely to himself and the room, hoping it would settle the matter.

Grace slowly started assembling the bedding, but his brow didn’t unfurrow. “No.” He finally said.

“What?”

“No apology needed… so, no apology accepted.” Grace said. “No.”

“The fuck?”

Grace sighed, lowering a final blanket. “It’s okay.” He cracked a smile, but it seemed forced. “If it makes you feel better, I cry on Rocky all the time. Just—” Grace sighed again. “It’s okay.” He reached over and tapped on the

laptop. The star chart disappeared, replaced by a dull blank backdrop. “Sorry our holodeck excursion didn’t go as planned.”

Simon mulled this over. “Apology not accepted.” He leaned his head against the door frame. “If anything, ‘seems right. Every holodeck episode gets fucked.”

Grace laughed at that, and it untangled something in Simon’s chest.

“Yeah, fair enough.” Grace gestured around to the walls. “Do you want to see anything, or do you want to try and get some sleep?”

Simon didn’t want to risk sleeping, but a bone deep exhaustion had settled over him, and it didn't seem like it was going to give him a choice. “I could sleep,” he said.

Grace picked his way around the blankets to where Simon was leaning against the door frame. “Okay.” He set the laptop down and helped Simon over to the makeshift bed. “You can control the light level with this, and if you need anything just holler. Rocky will probably insist on watching you sleep, but I can tell him not to if you want some space—”

“You’re not staying?” Simon inwardly flinched at how desperate his voice sounded.

Grace seemed surprised. “Well…there’s not room for two beds, but I can set up right outside if you’d like.” He gestured to the corridor outside.

Simon knew he should drop it. He should have nodded and said ‘I’m fine, you can go back down the ladder to your own blanket pile.’

Instead, he heard himself say. “Stay.” His fist tightened around the blankets under him, and he bit back a pathetic *‘please’*.

Grace faltered in the doorway. “Yeah, yeah okay.”

Chapter 12: The Fox

Chapter Summary: Grace has a nightmare, Simon does his best to help.

The fox ran.

Dogs bayed behind him and he dodged through the dry yellowed grass. His heart pattered hard against his ribs, and his breath formed thick clouds before it was snatched away

The fence. He just needed to get to the fence. He could dig under it. He could burrow himself in the ground and hide.

The dogs were barking and yelping. It was the only sound louder than his own blood rushing in his ears. He could feel them nipping at his tail, their teeth brushing his fur almost snagging into his skin.

The fox flung himself at the base of the fence, flailing and digging trying to get under. The dogs snapped at him. He couldn't dig fast enough.

A dog's jaws snapped tight around the back of his neck pulling him back. The fox squeaked, and screamed, and floundered. He managed to wrench himself from one mouth, but another set of teeth instantly took its place. More and more mouths clamped down on him. His head, his legs, his tail. He was pinned to the ground, the smell of yellowed grass and wet dirt filled his snout.

He tried to dig his paws into the ground, tried to burrow, to drag himself down into the earth so they couldn't take him away.

The jaws snapped around his muzzle and Grace woke with a start. His dream was fading fast, but his heart still pounded in his chest. He tried to sit up but found himself wrapped up in something.

Grace froze.

Simon was pressed against his back. His arm was curled around Grace's middle, holding him tight.

"You alright?" Simon's grip lessened but he didn't let go. His voice was barely a whisper.

Grace squeezed his eyes shut “Yeah—” The gasp he had been holding escaped his throat, and he tried to steady his breathing. “Yeah, fine.”

They were still for a moment.

“Sorry, I... I didn’t hear...”

All Grace wanted to do was curl up and hide, burrow in the blankets. But that wouldn’t seem fine. He forced himself to roll over and face Simon. Simon didn’t let him pull away though, adjusting his arm to remain draped over Grace as he turned.

Their faces were so close. In the dull light he could see Simon’s gaze flit from Grace’s lips to his eyes and back.

“What did you say?” he asked

“I’m fine.”

Simon’s eyes flitted back up to Grace’s own, brow scrunched. He didn’t believe him. “Who were you calling for?”

Grace wasn’t sure. “What do you mean?”

“You were...” Simon’s gaze felt searingly hot this close up, but his voice was gentle. “You were telling someone you 'couldn’t do it'.”

No no no! No!! Carl. I can’t do it!

Simon studied Grace’s face carefully, searching for something. “You kept yelling for someone to— you kept saying ‘don’t do it.’”

Grace’s skin itched with the memory of the dry grass tangled in his fingers, the dirt in his mouth.

Carl was standing out of reach, his hands in his pockets.

You know who you are.

No! Don’t Do it! Don’t do it! Don’t do it!

You’re gonna do great.

Grace squeezed his eyes shut again. “I don’t— I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” Simon said, “I didn’t hear anything, then.”

They stayed like that for a long while. Grace could feel Simon’s gaze on him. Grace squirmed.

“What?” Simon grunted, his grip around Grace only slightly lessening.

“It’s just we’re still… You’re still holding on to me.”

“Oh, sorry,” Simon lifted his arm and Grace immediately regretted saying anything. The missing warmth and weight of Simon against him left him feeling cold and exposed

“I can let go,” Simon said, his hand still hovering over Grace. “It’s just, it helped when you… when I was… I thought it might help.”

“It did! It does—I…” Grace’s words failed him. Whatever he was trying to say died in his throat.

They both just stared at each other for a long moment. They were still so close, and Simon’s hand still hovered, unsure.

Simon was the one to break the silence this time. “Can I… can we keep…?”

Grace swallowed. He wanted him to put his arm back around him so bad. It was selfish, it was stupid, but Grace let himself nod.

The warmth and weight of Simon returned, and Grace buried his face in his shoulder. Grace told himself he would let Simon hold on to him, just for a minute. It was diplomatic. He would let Simon feel like he’d helped. He’d accept this peace-offering between them, then he’d pull away. But minutes passed and Grace couldn’t bring himself to do it.

The last thing he remembered before he fell asleep was being vaguely aware of their legs tangling together and Simon’s stubbled cheek pressing against his own.

When Grace came to his senses again, the blankets around him were empty. Faint light trickled in from the corridor outside which meant the *Hail Mary* thought it ought to be daytime. Grace's ears burned with embarrassment. He shouldn't have let that happen. There had to be something inappropriate about this. There was a huge power imbalance between them. He needed to get control of himself. Simon was injured, and Grace had... effectively kidnapped him?? They didn't have enough fuel to take him back to WISE 0855-0714. Grace was spiraling, he knew it, but he was also pretty sure he had a point.

Grace forced himself to sit up.

"Mornin'" Simon said casually. He sat across the small room with the laptop balanced on his knee. He over-exaggerated prodding at the keys. "So how does this work?"

Grace blinked. It seemed they were just going to pretend nothing happened. They shouldn't. Grace should say something. Apologize. Tell Simon that it wouldn't happen again. Instead, he said "It's Bluetooth."

Simon rested his hand on his thigh and glowered at the laptop. "The fuck is that?"

Grace blinked again, grappling with the fact that whatever Eden was, was capable of interstellar travel, but had apparently abandoned Bluetooth technology in the 50 years since they left Earth. "Here," he said, gesturing for Simon to bring him the laptop.

Simon obliged, handing it over and sitting cross-legged beside him.

Grace reconnected the laptop to the screens. He felt Simon watching over his shoulder with interest.

"What do you want to see?"

Simon waved his hand dismissively, still looking over Grace's shoulder.

"We'll go with the greatest hits then." Grace pulled up the surfing video and the walls roared to life with deep blue waves. Simon winced slightly. *Right, submarine.* Maybe big bodies of water weren't the move.

Grace swapped it to rolling hills and Simon's shoulders relaxed. He glanced around soaking in each angle. "That Earth?" he asked. "Real Earth, not fake *Star Trek* Earth."

Grace slid the laptop off his lap and stretched out on his back, leaning against the pillows. “Yup. That’s Earth.”

Long green grass waved in a gentle breeze, and fluffy white clouds dotted an otherwise clear blue sky. Grace could almost smell the summer air.

Simon nodded and went back to scanning the fake horizon. “s’nice” He finally said.

“Yeah, it is.” Grace agreed.

Bitterness rarely hit him anymore. He wasn’t going to die in space. He was on his way to Erid. He was ‘boldly going where no one had gone before’, but he would never see Earth again. And that hadn’t been his choice. He didn’t regret going back for Rocky, not even slightly. He regretted trusting Stratt.

“What else?” Simon asked. He was peering down at the laptop again.

“If we grab the tablet we could play shows,” Grace waved his arms at the 360 screens “*immersive.*”

Simon snorted dryly, and went back to scanning the fake horizon.

Grace watched him soak in the sight. “Can I ask you a question?”

Simon’s shoulder’s tensed ever so slightly.

“No more big questions. I promise. I— just… maybe we should get to know each other?”

“Okay?” Simon said, giving Grace a sideways glance.

Grace pressed forward. “Like I don’t know what your favorite color is? Anything? I mean if we’re going to be roommates…”

“Favorite color,” Simon repeated unimpressed.

“Sure,” Grace shrugged. “For example, I like yellow. You?”

Simon’s gaze lingered, holding Graces for just a moment before he glanced up at the LCD sky.

“Blue’s fine.”

Grace tried to suppress a giddy laugh. They were talking about normal stuff! Human stuff! “Okay, now you ask one,” he encouraged

Simon was quiet for a moment before he gestured to the laptop “Anything else from Earth?”

Okay, small talk wasn’t Simon’s strong suit. Grace pulled the laptop back into his lap. “For sure.” He selected the redwood forests and threw them up on the screen.

Massive old growth trees towered above them. A canopy of lush leaves filtered the sunlight creating dapples of warm yellow on the projected floor below. Simon was leaning down and Grace assumed he was studying those dapples before Grace realized his eyes were squeezed shut.

“Woah, woah! Too much?” Grace quickly dismissed the trees and the room returned to the dim stand-by screen. “There, it’s gone.”

Simon still didn’t open his eyes. His fingers clenched the grated floor under them.

Grace tentatively put a hand on his shoulder. “Simon?”

Simon took a sharp inhale and stood quickly. “I don't get to have that.” he said. His face was carefully blank, and he was avoiding Grace’s eyes. “I’m ready to go back down the ladder now.”

Chapter End Notes: For the record I think Simon's favorite color is probably green. But he panicked while looking into Grace's perdy blue eyes.

Chapter 13: Contamination

Chapter Summary: Something is leaking through the hull, into the Hail Mary.

Chapter Notes: Listen. The bugs in my jar are finally getting along, but sometimes you just gotta... shake it. You know? Rile them up a bit.

Simon finally had something to do. Rocky had instructed him on how to unwind his xeno... something… It was hard to understand Rocky sometimes when the laptop was too far away for Simon to hear and read the pop ups. Since Filament, Simon's hearing had been hit or miss.

It was easy to hear Rocky himself. The notes were way easier to pick out than the quiet consonants in English. Rocky's word for the xeno-stuff was a weird up and down scooping trill. He was catching on to more words without the translator, but he still wasn't entirely sure what the English word for the material was.

The task of unspooling was mind-numbing and finicky, and such a massive relief. It took Simon's mind off the projected grove he had seen yesterday. It should have been wonderful, but instead it had just felt like a kick in the face. He'd never get to go there, and that had been his choice.

Simon had gotten into a rhythm with the unspooling project, and Rocky seemed pleased with his work. He currently had one of Rocky's reject-xeno-whatevers pinched between his knees and was pulling satisfyingly long strands of the metal into a coil around his palm.

"Good, good, good! Simon much better at hand task than Grace."

"Hey!" Grace protested from behind his laptop.

"Grace always get distracted, not finish. Not help Rocky."

"I help!"

"Not finish."

Simon leaned over to Rocky conspiratorially. "He's just intimidated, I can do it faster than him." Simon shot Grace a challenging glance. "One handed."

Rocky wiggled enthusiastically and made a squeaky choral sound. Simon guessed it was a laugh.

“Oh, you’re on.” Grace said, picking up one of the models from Rocky’s project pile.

Rocky leaned his ball close to Simon. “Simon good. Simon trick Grace into help Rocky. Sneaky, sneaky, sneaky.”

Simon laughed. It almost startled him. It was a barking laugh, real and deep in his belly and it felt good. He was finally getting along with the alien after his rough first impression, and it was a relief to just be… talking.

Contaminant Detected.

All three of them jumped.

Red lights flashed overhead, and a blaring alarm was pulsing, loud and urgent.

“What is that?” Simon yelled, pushing himself to his feet.

“Oh God.” Grace was already running to the ladder. “Simon, stay put, it may be nothing. Rocky, I’ll check the breeder tanks in the lab, you check the fuel tanks! If there’s a leak, we need to find it.”

“A leak!?” Simon yelled after him.

“Stay put!”

Rocky hurdled his ball towards his tunnel system. *“Rocky collect sample. Meet Grace in Lab”*

“I can help! Tell me what to do!” Simon yelled after them.

Grace disappeared through the hatch at the top of the ladder and Rocky skittered through his tunnel out of sight.

Simon was alone.

The room was intermittently bathed in flashing red light as the warning siren continued to blare. His hand had curled into a fist and could feel his fingernails digging into his palm.

He would wait. Everything was fine. Grace said it could be nothing.

The red lights continued to flash, casting irregular shadows across the strewn projects on the counters and floor. The room was intermittently bathed in crimson.

Simon tightened his fist and breathed deep through his nose. He would wait. Grace asked him to wait. He would wait...

“Fuck this.”

Simon turned on his heel and hightailed it to the ladder. He wasn’t sure if the lab was anywhere near the ‘holodeck’ but it wasn’t a big ship. He could find his way there.

He swung himself up and nearly slipped, his muscle memory and adrenaline conveniently forgetting that one arm was No Longer Fucking Present.

“Fuck Me!” Simon righted himself and took it one rung at a time. He cursed his way up, needing to lean heavily against the side of the ladder to keep his balance. After weeks of mandated sedentariness his body was not used to the excursion, and he was embarrassingly still exhausted from yesterday’s trip up the ladder with Grace.

Simon heaved himself up onto the grated floor of the first landing.

Was the lab one more ladder up? He recognized the hallway in front of him, but the order of the rooms and ladders he had passed to get to the holodeck were jumbled in his head. He picked himself up off the floor and propelled himself down the corridor.

“Grace?!”

He glanced into the rooms as he passed them. “Where the fuck am I?”

This didn’t seem like the right area.

Simon froze.

An oozing patch of glimmering crimson blood and rust colored capillaries blossomed through the white paint above the airlock hatch. It was leeching through the bulkhead. Simon’s eyes darted to the porthole view outside, he expected to see that oppressive bloody mess pressing down on the windows of the *Hail Mary*, but he saw only stars.

This didn’t make sense. The breath was catching in his throat. He needed to find Grace. He needed to warn him.

Simon sprinted to the next ladder and hauled himself up. “Grace!?” he called, grunting with exertion as he pulled himself up onto the next landing.

“Simon?”

Grace appeared in the doorway just ahead. “What are you doing?” He hurried to Simon’s side and got a hand under his arm to help him up.

“The contamination—”

Rocky’s clattering footsteps interrupted from inside the lab, followed by urgent melody with no translation. The laptop was still downstairs, but Simon caught a few familiar notes

“Rocky have—” The rest was only notes to Simon.

“I can’t find any breech in the breeder tanks!” Grace shouted over his shoulder. He half led/half dragged Simon through the door to the lab and plunked him down into a chair. “I'm coming, I’m coming!” Grace sprinted away to the other side of the room, where Rocky was sliding a bundle of glass tubes through a sliding box attached to his habitat.

“Wait, Grace!” Simon shouted.

Grace didn’t seem to hear him.

Rocky was still chittering, half of his arms gesturing at the four tubes Grace was pulling out of the sliding box.

Rocky sang some more unintelligable notes.

Simon needed to warn them. They were looking in the wrong place. “Grace! It followed me here. It—”

Grace wasn’t listening. “This one’s from the xenonite repaired tank?” He yelled over his shoulder to Rocky.

“Yes—” Rocky hummed something else but Simon didn’t understand.

Grace popped open the sample in his hand and slid the other tubes aside. He scooped something out of it onto a small glass slide with frantic precision.

“Grace—” Simon tried to keep his voice steady.

Grace slid the glass sheet under some sort of viewer. “I can explain in a minute,” he said, not glancing Simon’s direction. Grace leaned in to look through the eye piece and yelled over his shoulder. “There’s no Taumeoba in this sample!”

Rocky shifted restlessly in his tunnel, moaning in a low frantic octave. Grace was already repeating the process with a new tube, tossing the first glass slide onto the counter beside him.

Simon pushed himself up out of the chair. “We have to go! We have to—”

Light glinted off the glass slide Grace had discarded. All of Simon's attention diverted to the thick tarlike blob in the center. It didn’t reflect any of the light of the room the way the glass did. It was a dark hole, like it was empty, absent… like it was eating the light. Simon’s hand grabbed instinctively for the sheath he knew was gone. “Sun-eater,” he breathed.

The Fathers words dredged themselves from his mind and into his mouth as bile. He recited the words in Eden Enochian under his breath. *Eden’s guardian. The fire of the cherubim's sword, given to us to guard the tree.*

“There’s none in this sample either!” Grace called over his shoulder, breaking the spell.

Simon’s heart was pounding. Where did Grace get this? The amount on this slide alone would have been enough to blow up a dozen Filament Stations.

Grace tossed the second slide on the counter. “There’s none in this sample either!”

There was no time. Simon needed to warn them about the contamination. The blood ocean had followed him here.

“Grace!!—”

“Just a second. I can explain in a second—” Grace called over his shoulder to Rocky again. “Third slide’s clean!”

Grace loaded the fourth slide and pressed his face to the eyepiece. “There’s nothing in this one eith–”

“Listen to me!!!” Simon slammed his fist down on the counter and the supports under the thin metal buckled.

Grace reeled back, almost falling out of his chair.

“It’s by the air lock!” Simon shouted. “The blood is seeping through the hull!”

“Blood!?” Grace spluttered.

“The blood-moon!” Simon yelled “There was something down there with me! It was alive!”

“Simon—”

Grace wasn’t listening. His hands were still hovering over the samples from the fuel tanks. Simon grabbed the front of Grace’s shirt and hauled him up. He needed to get Grace down to the airlock, now.

“The blood—” Simon’s words were coming out fast. Grace needed to understand the stakes. “The *SM-8*, they thought it was *us*. All of us. They thought the thing down there caused the quiet rapture.”

“—The what?!”

“The stars! It killed the stars!”

Rocky was throwing himself up against the walls of his habitat spitting notes that Simon could only half understand.

“Simon keep [whistling] Grace. Simon [angry humming] Rocky [angrier humming] Simon —"

Simon looked back to see Grace’s eyes wide with fear. His hands hovered around Simon’s wrist.

He was terrified.

Simon let go. “I’m sorry— I— You just need to *LISTEN* to me. The contamination is by the airlock! It came with *me*!”

“Okay! Okay, we’ll—” Grace held his hands out defensively and took a step back. “We’ll go look at the airlock—Just—” There was a tremble in his voice that made Simon’s heart sink.

Simon backed away quickly, giving Grace space. “I didn’t mean—” His back hit the doorway with a thud, nearly knocking the wind out of him. “I just needed you to *listen.*” He could hear the desperation cracking at the edges of his own voice. “There’s something here, and I don’t know how to stop it!”

Chapter 14: Blood-vestigation

Chapter Summary: Blood-moon contamination is leaking through the hull. Their options are limited and the trio's coping strategies don't seem to align. Rocky observes some strange human behaviors.

Chapter Notes: I was only going to do one chapter today but I have ZERO self control. Also thank you thank you thank you for all of the kind comments. I'm sorry I haven't been able to respond to them all but know that I am reading them and they are making my day. Literally giggling and jumping up and down, you are so kind. Anyway enjoy this Rocky POV chapter, byeeeeeeeee!

“Simon, just stay here for a minute.” Grace gave Simon a wide berth on the way to the door, and Simon backed away to give him room.

“I’ll stay here— I’m sorry. Just don’t touch it. It's—”

“Simon it’s fine, just stay here. Please.”

Rocky was still spitting mad. *“No not fine! Bad, Bad, bad! Rocky put Simon in airlock until—”*

“Rock.” Grace said, shooting him a hard look. “Meet me down there.”

“Yes. Fine.”

“Grace—” Simon started

“Just.” Grace’s voice was louder than it usually was. “Stay. Here.”

Simon backed up and Grace started down the hall towards the ladder. Rocky made his way after him. He made sure that Simon got a good look at his balled-up fist on the way out.

Rocky was already one landing down when he heard Simon whisper, “Fuck me.”

Grace was already at the airlock. His head was thrown back and both of his hands were clasped behind it. He let out a long angry puff of air.

“Well, this might as well happen.”

Rocky surveyed the airlock and the surrounding walls. He could see that the *Hail Mary*'s hull was still intact between them and the *SM-13*. Despite that fact though, there was a rough patch of something viscous pooling on the inner wall perfectly aligned with it.

Grace's hands fell to his sides. "I'm sorry Rock, should have been more careful. I must have missed some when I cleaned and now it—"

"Think contaminant coming through hull. Statement."

"What?" Grace turned, his voice sharp with panic. "Is there damage to—"

"Hull intact. No holes, no damage. Somehow leaking anyway." Rocky rotated, listening hard, and scanning the texture of the rest of the ship. *"No other rough patches inside."* Rocky pointed up at the weird viscous patch above the airlock. *"Just one. Parallel SM-13"*

Grace turned back to the curved wall above the airlock. "What the heck?"

"Taumeoba learn to push through xenonite. This learn to push through metal. Question?"

Grace nodded slowly. "Maybe… That'd be bad news for us though." He was pacing around now, getting different angles.

Rocky would never understand how Grace could function with such a two-dimensional sense that required him to move around to see a whole shape. (And even then, he could only see the outside of it, which was baffling.)

Grace was talking again, but Rocky was distracted. Simon was moving around the lab above them. Rocky was about to go back up there to curse the blobs that spawned him, until he figured out what he was doing.

Simon had pulled off the section of counter that he had damaged, and was using a human tool to fix the supports. (A hammer? Or was that one the wrench? All of Grace's human tools look like they were designed for hitting things, it was hard to tell them apart.) Regardless, Simon was disassembling the counter's supports and using the tool he had found to bend them back into shape.

Good. Space blob break? Space blob fix.

“Rock?” Grace was peering down at him expectantly.

“Repeat question?”

“Is there a way to get the *SM-13* off of the *Hail Mary*?” Grace went back to staring up at the contaminated patch. “Would that even help?”

“Difficult to detach. Could use pressure tool Grace use to cut Rocky tunnel when leave for Earth…” Rocky hummed. “But since two ships directly glued, it would leave part of SM-13 attached.”

There was also a high likelihood that Grace would accidentally cut through the *Hail Mary*’s hull. Grace wouldn’t be able to see through what he was cutting, and Rocky had some concerns about his depth perception in general… but he kept that part to himself.

“Dang it.” Grace plunked onto the ground next to Rocky and rubbed his face. “Okay, so we just keep decontam-ing?”

“Rocky and Grace try different materials. See if any keep contaminant out. Question?”

Grace nodded. “Yeah, I should take a sample.” He rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. “Which means I need to go back up to the lab to grab the stuff.” He let out a long sigh.

“Rocky grab.” He said already making his way up to the lab level.

“Wait, how are you gonna—”

“Make Simon give. Grace stay here.”

“I can—”

“Grace stay. Rocky make Simon help.”

Rocky heard Grace let out another long breath, but he thought this one might be a little relieved.

Rocky pattered up towards the lab watching Simon through the ceiling. He was laying under the counter re-screwing the supports together. It wasn’t a perfect repair job, but he had done it surprisingly quickly.

Rocky clacked into the lab, but it didn’t seem like Simon had noticed him. Rocky thought he should have heard him coming, but maybe he had over estimated human hearing.

Rocky watched for a moment, listening to Simon mumble to himself. “You stupid piece of shit. You just had to fuck this up too. OW Fuck…” He dropped the tool on his face and sat up.

He had finally noticed Rocky in his xenonite habitat. The two of them just stared at each other from their halves of the lab. This staring thing was becoming a habit between the three of them. That and the humans blinking at eachother. Rocky wondered if it was some sort of cultural thing Grace had forgotten to tell him about.

Simon broke the silence, sliding the tool he was holding off of his lap onto the floor. “Sorry.”

Rocky let his carapace clatter slightly to vent his frustration. Simon wouldn’t know what it meant, but it still felt good to show his disapproval. Simon dropped his gaze and nodded. Maybe he did get the message.

Rocky made his way to the sliding exchange box and tapped on the clear xenonite barrier.

Simon looked up and tilted his head.

Rocky tapped the barrier again and pointed at the drawer of sample containers.

Simon followed the gesture and pushed himself up off the floor towards the drawer.

This human was much better at this than Grace had been.

“Do you need this?” Simon asked, holding up a box with nitrile gloves, scrapers and a handful of glass sample containers.

Rocky tilted his carapace up and down approximating a nod.

Simon started towards the sliding exchange box, but hesitated.

“You’re going to take a sample of the blood.” He said, his brow scrunching down over his eyes. When Grace’s face did that, it usually meant he was going to be difficult.

Rocky tilted his carapace again and made a grabby motion for the sample jars.

“Don’t touch it.” Simon said. Rocky could see his heart rate spike in his chest.

This human was wigging out again and Rocky couldn’t stop his carapace from clattering in new frustration.

Simon was pulling the box close to his chest. “It’s dangerous, you don’t understand. If—If you need a sample—let me do it.”

Rocky considered this.

“Fine. Simon come.”

At least he was ‘being a freak-out’ in a helpful way. Rocky made his way back down to the airlock, listening to Simon clamber down behind him.

Rocky made it back to the landing to find Grace standing again peering up at the splotch on the wall.

“Hey, thanks for getting those—” He started before he saw Simon coming down the ladder.

Simon dropped down the last few rungs and held up his hand with the samples. He was staying back, stooping slightly. “Rocky said I could take the sample, just show me how.”

“What?”

“Simon act like freak out again. Easier to let Simon help.”

Simon obviously didn’t understand what Rocky had said, but nodded in concurrence. “You don’t understand what it is. Just let me take the sample—I'm already fucked.”

Grace looked perplexed. “Do you know what it is then?”

“I told you, it’s blood. It’s *us*, but there’s something wrong with it. It can eat through you, and there was something alive in it.” Rocky could hear the effort Simon was making to keep his voice down and his body still, but both still trembled slightly.

“Simon, I really think I should take the sample—”

"No!” Simon swallowed and brought his voice down a decibel. “Please, just... show me how.”

Grace pulled his glasses down around his chin and rubbed his eyes. “Okay, okay.”

Rocky watched Grace talk Simon through how to collect a sterile sample and helped him pull on a nitrile glove. Simon made him step back and Grace shot a glance at Rocky, which he ignored.

Simon was approaching the spot like it might rip his hand off. Rocky studied the stump that was left of Simon's missing appendage… it might have ripped his hand off.

The contaminant dribbled easily into the sample jars and Simon dutifully filled each one and set them back in the box. His heart was thumping hard in his chest the whole time. Simon really believed he was in some kind of danger but was doing this anyway. To protect him and Grace?

Simon carefully placed the last jar inside and closed the sample box. "Okay, now what?"

"Now we put the samples in one of the bio-hazard cabinets, or maybe the breeder tanks to seal it off." Grace said as he put on his own gloves and helped Simon roll his glove off of his hand. "We'll decontam the wall. Then Rocky and I will see what materials it can't leak through, and we'll use that to patch up the wall."

Simon nodded. Rocky could hear his heart rate slowing slightly.

Grace picked up the sample box carefully. He tilted his head down and coaxed Simon to look at him. "I'm sorry I didn't listen before. Is there anything else you can tell me about this stuff?"

Simon paused a moment. "The *SM-8*— Some scientists from the Consolidation thought it might have had something to do with the Quiet Rapture… the stars going out."

Grace nodded. "Well, I guess we'll find out."

After all of the samples were properly stashed, and both humans and the wall were properly decontaminated, Grace convinced Simon to go back down the ladder to rest.

Rocky listened in from the lab, but he was confident now that Simon had no intention of hurting Grace. This new human was just… prone to 'being a freak out.' Which to be fair, Rocky hadn't come away from his space experience entirely the same either.

He would probably be at least a little odd once he got back home. He hoped Adrian would be patient. He knew she would be but, sometimes he caught himself droning like he did when he was alone on his own ship, just wandering. Grace didn't know the difference, and Rocky could write off a lot of his freak-outs as normal Eridian behavior. But once he got home…

Adrian would understand.

Downstairs Grace was helping Simon down the first ladder. His appendages were shaking and he was letting Grace help. That was a bad sign. The adrenaline must have worn off, and all the activity must have caught up to him. It didn't seem like Simon would make it all the way down to the med-suite right now.

"I think we should maybe stay on this level." Grace said "I can set you up in the projector room— the holodeck, again."

Simon's feet reached the floor and he dismounted sideways off the ladder. He slid his back down the wall. "S—sorry." He panted. "I—"

Grace crouched in front of him. "No no! I'm sorry. Stratt didn't make this ship very ADA friendly, so shame on her."

Simon took a few more gulping breaths. "I don't know what the fuck any of that means."

Grace laughed. "Right, my bad. Uhhh, just— sorry there's so many ladders. Do you think you're good to wait here and I'll go get your stuff?"

Simon nodded and Grace headed down the ladder.

As soon as Grace was gone, Simon let his head fall back against the wall with a dull thud. He let out a low whine and his eyes squeezed shut.

Rocky had to guess he had been holding back before, trying not to let Grace see the full extent of the pain he was in. Rocky could still 'see' him, but Simon must not realize that. Rocky listened carefully. Nothing new was damaged inside of Simon, but his heart was beating fast and parts of him were more inflamed than they had been earlier in the day. Rocky didn't fully understand the ins and outs of leaky human bodies, but it looked uncomfortable.

Grace was returning. He tossed the bedding up the ladder and clambered up after it. Simon picked his head up and started leveraging himself to his feet using the ladder. He waited for Grace, and allowed himself to be led to the ‘holodeck.’ (Grace had also called it the ‘don’t-go-crazy-room.’ It had a lot of uses.)

Rocky watched from the lab as Grace busied himself building the strange blanket nest. He had been building this type of bedding for both him and Simon since his arrival. It looked comfortable, and Rocky wondered how many different ways to sleep humans had come up with. They spent a lot of their time sleeping, so he guessed it made sense to have some variety in technique.

Simon’s heart rate was going up again. This didn’t seem good. Rocky transferred to his tunnel. He should probably let Grace know Simon was… ill? His blood was going pretty fast. Rocky could see him leaning heavily against the wall, handing Grace things when he asked for them.

Downstairs, Grace put his hands on his hips. “Alright you’re all set I’m going to head to the lab and—”

Simon’s heart rate spiked again. Rocky was half way down, and about to turn the corner where he was confident Grace would be able to hear him.

“Wait—” Simon said, his hand spasmed at his side as Grace turned to leave. “I— Can you stay?”

Simon averted his head down as Grace turned back to face him. “I—” he said again, trailing off. “Please.”

Grace’s heart was going faster now. What was wrong with the humans?

“Y-yeah. I can stay.” Grace said after a moment.

Both of their heart rates slowed slightly and Rocky paused to observe. Maybe there was no emergency here.

Simon’s hand fidgeted at his side. “I’m sorry I— I’m sorry about before. I didn’t mean for that to happen.” His head was still down. “Are you… can we still.”

Grace cocked his head to the side. “We’re good. You’re not uhhh… in trouble? If that’s what you mean?”

Simon finally looked up. “No… I mean… can I… Can I still touch you?”

Grace paused. “Yeah. How about we both sleep here tonight. I’ll— I’ll just go grab a few things. I’ll be right back. Okay?”

Simon’s heart rate stayed where it was and Rocky backed his way up his tunnel back to the lab.

Touch must be really important to humans.

Chapter 15: Safe

Chapter Summary: Grace convinces Simon that he's safe and shows him rain.

Chapter Notes: Don't worry y'all! This chapter has cuddling! P.S. I'm hoping to drop a flurry of chapters this weekend, 'cause it's Pride where I live and I want to get to the gay kissing (TM), asap!

Simon buried his face in the blankets and tried to control his breathing. Grace had gone to 'grab a few things' but Simon knew that was a lie.

Simon had shown his true colors, now Grace and Rocky knew that he was dangerous. It wouldn't be worth it for them to keep him. The contamination had followed him here and the next logical step was for them to get rid of him.

Simon tried to guess how they would do it. Probably the airlock. It was simple. It was close to where Simon was now.

He should run, hide himself somewhere on the ship, but that wouldn't last long. This ship wasn't like a space station, with maintenance hatches and long stretches of unused corridors from when there were more humans alive to fill them. The Hail Mary wasn't big enough to hide in, they'd find him.

The grated floor buzzed slightly with the vibrations of approaching footsteps.

Simon sat up and pushed himself against the curved wall opposite the door. He tried to steel himself. He wanted to go stoically, he wanted to be stoney and brave like the hundreds of Eden fodder he had piloted to their deaths. But he couldn't. He could hear himself babbling.

"Please, don't—"

Grace faltered in the doorway.

"Don't kill me. I'll make it worth it for you to keep me. I'll—"

Grace dropped the blanket pile and approached slowly, his eyes wide with concern. "What? Simon—"

Simon pushed himself on his knees. He was begging. He couldn't stop himself. "I didn't mean to bring it with me. You've gotta believe me—"

"Simon, I don't—"

Simon reached out. The hem of Grace's shirt bunched in his hand as he continued to plead. His chest was pressed against Grace's leg. "Please. I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Simon!" Grace tugged Simon's hand off his shirt and knelt down to meet his eyes. Grace's hand was wrapped tightly around his wrist. "Simon— Simon! Stop! I'm not going to hurt you. I need you to calm down."

He was lying. Simon knew he was lying.

Grace's blue eyes were studying him. His brow was furrowed. His mouth was open but he didn't seem to know what to say. His grip relaxed around Simon’s wrist but he didn’t let go. "I— Why do you think I would kill you?!"

Simon didn't like this trap. The answer would be an admission. Like The Father offering final penance, an opportunity to admit and repent before punishment.

"It's after me. If you get rid of me you'll be safe. And I— I—" Simon couldn't finish. "Please." He wasn't sure what he was begging for anymore. Mercy? Forgiveness? Grace?

Grace released his wrist and put his hands on Simon's shoulders. "I'm not going to— that’s not—" he seemed bewildered. Simon could see him struggling to find words. "Simon, I'm not going to hurt you. “Rocky isn't going to hurt you. We just got scared. I— don't like being grabbed and I—"

"I'm sorry—"

Grace's hands pressed more firmly into shoulders. "It's okay— stop. You're not in trouble. We're not going to hurt you. I—" Grace was searching Simon's face. "How do I prove that to you?"

The question hung. Both of them were breathing fast and shallow.

Simon wanted to reach up and grab one of Grace's hands. To pull it away, or pull it closer? He wasn't sure. But Grace had just said he didn't like being grabbed. Simon’s hand spasmed in the air. Grace noticed.

His hand on Simon's face relinquished, leaving a cold outline where it had been. Grace gently wrapped his fingers around Simon's. "You can touch

me," he said, his tone was carefully even. "I just like to know it's coming. Warn me, make sure I can see you first."

Simon nodded, his fingers squeezing around Grace's hand.

"I'm not going to hurt you." Grace said slowly. "Do you believe me?"

Simon hesitated. He didn't understand, but he did believe him.

Grace was still waiting for an answer, dismay creeping into his eyes.

Simon nodded. "—believe you." His voice came out hoarse and quiet.

"Okay," Grace said. Relief tinged his voice as he gently coaxed Simon back into the blankets.

Without letting go of Simon's hand, he reached over and pulled the laptop onto his lap. The dull default of the projection walls dimmed and a quiet, rolling, pattering sound slowly came in over the speakers.

"It's rain," Grace said. "It helps me sleep sometimes, does this... is it okay?" Grace gestured up to the domed ceiling.

The screens above looked like they had transformed into glass. The sky was a cool grey-blue and thousands of water droplets were falling in a regular rhythm. They were pooling and dripping down the sides of the room.

It was beautiful.

Simon nodded. Dumbfounded. The dull thrumming of it was untangling something in his chest. His eyes were suddenly so heavy.

Grace guided him to lie down next to him, still not letting go of his hand. He wrapped his other arm under Simon and held him close.

"Let's just try and get some sleep. Okay?"

Simon nodded and Grace's weight settled against him. Grace's hand in his was pressed against Simon's chest. Grace was curled against Simon's back.

The warmth of Grace against him and the dull murmur of the rain slowed Simon's thoughts to a crawl. He was encircled. Protected.

Grace wasn't going to hurt him. He believed that.

Grace’s thumb was absentmindedly rubbing up and down the back of Simon’s hand. He could feel his breath against the back of his neck, slow and steady.

Simon blinked up at the ceiling. He watched the rain gently cascade, and pale mist drift in the artificial sky until his eyes fell closed.

He was safe.

Chapter End Notes: Fellas is it gay to cuddle under the pattering of artificial rain?

Chapter 16: Astrophage School

Chapter Summary: Grace gets to do what he does best! Teach! Also Simon and Rocky bond.

Chapter Notes: Listen, as someone with a very conservative religious background. (Don't worry I'm safe in my gay/trans life now) I think Simon's death-cult education would be wack! (Like I literally have extended family members who straight up think dinosaurs are fake cause they aren't in the Bible)

Grace swiveled in one of the lab chairs. He was trying to force his brain to boot-up to no avail.

He and Rocky had figured out that the “blood” contaminant wasn’t able to get through xenonite. So they had glued a barrier made of the stuff along the whole length of the wall above the airlock. But since the contaminate could travel through the metal hull, it was still seeping out the sides and pooling around the edges. The xenonite barrier was still slowing it down significantly, but they needed to come up with a new plan for the long term.

He also still needed to find a solution for their food situation. All he could think of was breeding more taumeoba to munch on. He could do it, but it was missing some key nutrients. Grace didn’t think they’d make the full trip on taumeoba alone. He and Simon had enough real food for at least a year, even with them both eating, but he’d have to tell Simon about the situation eventually.

Grace sighed trying to untangle the anxiety knot in his stomach. He *would* tell him, he just wanted to have a solution, or at least the beginning of a solution before he broke the news.

He let himself slide out of his chair onto the floor and peered around from the new angle. He was looking for a distraction project. His eyes fell on the bio-safety cabinet where he had shoved the weird branch samples and the life-vest with the black box strapped inside it. He had planned to come back after a couple of weeks, the same timeline he had planned to break quarantine with Simon, but that plan had been immediately thrown out the window.

Grace groaned and scrubbed at his face with his hands.

He had covered the cabinet with a black-out curtain to shield it from any light, just in case illumination had any effect on the branch samples or any contaminants on the black box... But he had inadvertently out-of-sight-out-of-minded it.

He really didn't want to open up whatever can of worms this was with Simon right now. Things had been really... tense after the contamination detection incident. Things had mostly settled down, and even he and Rocky were on better terms again. Simon finally seemed to believe he wasn't a hostage, but...

Grace let his hands fall to the floor next to his head and stared up at the ceiling.

He'd ask Simon tomorrow, he told himself. He'd bring him up to the lab and they'd look at it together. He had nothing but time on his hands. Almost *three more years* in space to do nothing but figure this out. There was no reason to do it today in particular.

Simon appeared in his field of view, hovering in the doorway to the lab. "Alright?"

Grace sighed. "Yeah, just staring at the ceiling.... recreationally."

Simon ventured closer and held up two sleeves of cookies. "I want to trade." He said and dropped them onto a nearby table.

This was an unexpected turn. Thus far Grace had been the one leading their (admittedly one-sided) negotiations. The cookies for example, had been a bribe to get Simon to let Armondo treat him weeks ago. He vaguely wondered where Simon had been stashing them.

Grace propped himself up on his elbows. "I'm listening."

Simon shuffled hesitantly before crossing his legs and sitting on the floor across from Grace. "I want you to tell me about the sun eater— the —you called it an astrophage?"

Grace blinked. Simon had no way of knowing this, but Grace was probably *the* expert on astrophage in the known universe, equal only to Rocky.

Grace and Carl had written *the* paper on how to breed it. ("Astrophage reproduction. How to make an alien baby with hardware store supplies")

"Alright," Grace said. "But I have a counteroffer."

Simon stiffened, but nodded. Grace hoped he wasn't pushing his luck and continued. "I take one package of cookies, and I answer your question. You keep the other one, and I get to ask you something."

Simon's hand fidgeted with the hem of his shirt while he studied Grace. "Agreed." He said finally, and reached up to grab a sleeve of cookies off the table. He slid one across the floor to Grace. "Astro... whatever-it-is first."

"Alright!" Grace picked up the package and gestured with it to the whiteboard across the room. "Astrophage 101, is in session!"

Grace held out his hand to Simon and helped him up off the floor. For some reason Grace didn't let go of his hand as he led him to the other side of the lab. Simon didn't pull his hand away either.

"So," Grace started, forcing himself relinquish Simon's hand. He picked up a handful of markers. "Let's start with what you know." Grace popped the lid off of a nice chunky green Expo, and it felt good to be back in teacher mode again.

Simon hesitated. "Why can't you just tell me... everything?"

"I wouldn't know where to start. Like, do we need to start at its cellular structure, or can we jump to what we know about its life cycle."

Simon stared at him blankly and Grace decided he felt like pushing his luck after all. He tossed the cookies back to Simon. "We can call the deal off if you don't want to —"

"No." Simon immediately tossed them back like they were a hot potato.

Grace felt a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth, he was itching to indulge a familiar rhythm. "Okay, tell me what you know." Grace tossed the cookies again "Cookies are lava!"

Simon caught them with a baffled expression. "What?"

"Tell me what you know, then toss it back. *Hurry,* the cookies are lava!"

Simon still looked puzzled, but the false urgency worked. "It's— it's why the stars are going out."

"Great!" Grace jotted that on the whiteboard. "Now toss it back!" Simon threw them to him and Grace was beaming. "Okay, what else? Even if it's just a guess."

“It absorbs light?” Simon was getting it now. The cookies were flying back and forth between them without hesitation

"True!” Grace caught the lava-cookies and wrote ‘*absorbs light’* on the board. He drew a little arrow towards a doodle of the sun and the first note ‘*stars going out’*. He tossed the package back. “What else?”

Simon rolled the cookies in his hand, thinking. “It explodes.”

Grace noted it on the board, “Yup,” He ignored the heat welling in his cheeks and the phantom shockwave on his skin coming off the Project *Hail Mary* science building. He wrote “explodes” and scribbled a comic book *POW*-shape around it. Grace tossed the cookies back. “What else?”

Simon thought for a moment and slowly shook his head. “No, it...The sun-eater was…” Simon tossed Grace the cookies. “I don’t know anything else.”

“Okay great, this is a good start.”

Grace got the distinct impression that Simon might have had something else he wasn’t sure about, but this *was* a good start. (And he could always prod again later.)

“Let’s start at the beginning, from Earth’s perspective.” Grace drew a rudimentary solar system on the board. He labeled the planets as he talked, skipping the irrelevant ones.

“A radio telescope enthusiast named Irina Petrova discovered there was a streak of infrared light going from Venus to our Sun.” Grace switched to a red marker and drew a line between the two scribbled celestial bodies. “So experts sent a probe up there to collect a sample and I— well— long story short a bunch of people looked at it and we figured out it was a single cell organism, it was mostly made of water, and it consumes energy from the sun and then expels it for propulsion.” Grace paused, stepping back from the whiteboard mid-doodle. “Am I making sense so far?”

Simon squirmed slightly, his expression carefully blank. “I don’t— I don’t know what cell means for this... like a fuel cell?”

Oh boy.

Hours later Astrophage 101 was still in session, and they had both broken into their respective package of cookies.

Grace felt like he was finally getting a handle on what Simon knew and didn't know, but his knowledge was a weird mosaic, surprisingly advanced in some places and absolutely absent in others. He reminded Grace of a homeschooled student that joined his class halfway through his first year teaching at Grover Cleveland Middle.

The kid came into the public school system reading at an insanely high grade level, but he was also convinced that dinosaurs were fake. (He said so in class multiple times, insisting that "God never made them" and "they were a trick by the devil".) Grace lost a lot of sleep over that kid.

Like Grace's homeschooler, Simon was smart, but was missing information. He only seemed to know what had been absolutely necessary to survive his unique space station/spaceship environment. He knew how to read (Grace had made the mistake of checking, and Simon had taken great offense.)

Grace gathered that he spoke several languages fluently including English, Korean, and a constructed language called Eden Enochian, and had a passing fluency in a few others. Which in hindsight made sense. Grace hadn't even considered that it was a huge coincidence they spoke English. (Stratt would have chided him for that *"Very American."*)

Simon also had a good understanding of how space worked and seemed to have a knack for geometry and physics, but everything else was a blank.

"So… Astrophage is alive." Simon said, popping a cookie into his mouth. "— Like a really small animal," he said around it.

"Yes, but—" Grace twisted his own cookie package closed. The sugar was giving him a headache. "Astrophage probably doesn't think. It just reacts to stimuli and reproduces. Like a germ."

"Right, right."

Simon had known about germs, but somehow that knowledge had never come with anything past "if someone is sick it can spread" and "if a wound isn't clean, it could get infected." He knew how to combat germs, he just apparently never knew what they were.

Rocky pattered into his half of the lab. *"Rocky sleep now. Grace watch. Question?"*

Simon leaned forward. “What’s that sound mean at the end?” He nodded his head to Rocky. “When you go ♫⋆⍰” Simon whistled a surprisingly accurate impression.

“Means question.” Rocky paused. *“Oh, no laptop. Still in human sleeping room.”*

“Right, sorry,” Grace said. “I really should just plug the translator program into the main system— It’s like the Eridian equivalent of a question mark.”

“Ah,” Simon leaned back and crunched on another cookie. “Can I help watch? ♫⋆⍰” Simon added the question whistle at the end.

Grace and Rocky both froze and Simon stopped mid chew. “... Or would that be weird?” Simon held up his hand “Sorry. I just want to be helpful—”

“Simon understand Rocky. Question!?”

“Uhh, mostly? Like half the time. I mean it’s hard to miss names. And the word sleep—feel like that’s all we talked about when I first got here.”

Grace mentally added Eridian proficiency to Simon’s resume, and tried not to seethe with jealousy. It had taken Grace almost ten months in space before he stopped using the translator.

Rocky side-stepped closer to Simon, almost pressing himself against the side of the xenonite barrier.

For a moment Rocky and Simon just “stared” at each other.

“Uh...” Simon started.

“Rocky use “Rocky” for word “self.””

Grace had programmed the word “Rocky” into the translator twice, once for his full name and once for what Grace guessed was more of an “I” or “me” equivalent. But it felt wrong to interrupt and clarify. Rocky’s posture was weirdly formal. He was as tall on his legs as he could go, and incredibly still.

Grace glanced at Simon whose attention was rapt on Rocky. He nodded, apparently getting what Rocky was saying.

“*Rocky tell Simon Rocky long name. Simon listen. Question?”*

Simon nodded. “Y–yeah, I’ll listen.”

Grace suppressed the urge to throw up his hands in a jealous fit. Simon said he understood ‘half the time’ yeah right, sounded like he was getting every word!

Rocky’s focus was still entirely on Simon, he pulled two of his forelimbs together and sang his full name. All of the rich rumbles and quiet whistles. It was one of the first things Grace and Rocky had exchanged. But it felt like this time, between him and Simon, it was different. Like Rocky had decided he had earned it.

Rocky finished and his carapace settled. He relaxed down into his normal posture, quiet.

Simon swallowed, nodding. Whatever significance this interspecies ritual had, it wasn’t lost on him. “Thanks— Thanks for telling me your name.” he said. “Sorry I can’t say it.”

“Rocky can’t say Simon or Grace name. But Rocky know. And now Simon know. Important.”

An uncharacteristically reverent silence fell over the lab. Grace was all at once aware that they were the only three living things for light years and light years, and it was an insane cosmic coincidence that they had ever met.

Chapter End Notes: The girls are no longer fightinggggggg!

Chapter 17: The Father’s Sword

Chapter Summary: Simon and Grace watch Rocky sleep. Simon's mind wanders and Grace asks him about what's stashed in the bio-safety cabinet.

Simon wasn’t sure what he had expected alien sleep to look like. Maybe that Rocky would glow or something? Instead, Rocky just looked dead.

“Yeah,” Grace said, loading samples into a centrifuge. “Once he’s asleep he won’t wake up until his body is ready. Which is good because I’m kinda loud.” Grace clicked a button on the machine, and it started to whir.

Grace kept yapping, but with the added noise it was a little harder to understand what he was saying. “You know when we first (?) he (???)….” Grace turned away and Simon lost the rest of the sentence. He’d catch up. Grace talked a lot and it was pretty easy to just nod like he was following along and put it together later.

Grace turned around again and sat across from Simon at the table. “He could be out for anywhere between three and twelve hours, so if (???) bored we can (???).” With the whir of the centrifuge Simon had to focus to parse his words. He watched Grace’s lips as he talked, but he kept missing snippets because Simon was distracted. Grace’s lips looked so soft. He wanted to reach out and run his thumb across them. He wanted to press his own lips against them, and he wanted to know what it would feel like if Grace took his cock into his mouth—he needed to focus. The last thing Simon needed to do was come on to Grace and get himself thrown out an airlock.

“I’m sorry, is there something on my face?” Grace swiped at his mouth self-consciously.

Simon felt himself flush. “No, sorry, hard to hear if I can’t see what you’re saying.”

“Wait, you mean lip reading? Have you had a hard time hearing this whole time?”

Simon seized on this technically true explanation for his ogling. “Listen I’ve been around a lot of—" he grimaced, biting back the word ‘explosions.’ He didn’t feel like divulging that part of the shit he had done. “Eardrums are fucked. I can usually hear fine, just helps to see too.” He added quickly.

“Oh,” Grace took that in.

Simon cleared his throat. “So, what are you doing? Can I help?”

“Oh, right. Actually maybe, just a sec.” Grace picked up a note pad off the table and mulled around the lab as he talked. “I’ve been thinking about what you told me about Eden and the Consolidation. Rocky and I might be able to build some probes and send them information, and possibly some taumeoba to help them out.” Grace continued to move around, but Simon noticed he was cheating his face towards him more and turning his back less. Which was touching and helpful, but also torture.

Now there was no escape from Grace’s lips or his big blue eyes. Simon felt like one of the lab samples, utterly exposed and enlarged to 100x under Grace’s careful gaze. There was no way Grace would miss any detail of where Simon’s eyes were lingering now. He was going to figure out what Simon was thinking, what he was trying hard not to indulge.

“… which is why I wanted you to take a look.” Grace was looking at him expectantly, and Simon realized he had missed all of what Grace had been saying.

“Uh—Yeah,” Simon tried.

Grace nodded and gestured to one of the cabinets, this one had a sheet draped over it. “It’s just right here, come on over.”

Simon really wished he had been paying better attention. He made his way around the table and joined Grace in front of a covered cabinet.

Grace looked over at him sheepishly. “Full disclosure, I haven’t looked at these since I put them in here, I kind of forgot and—” Grace pulled the sheet off of the cabinet and Simon’s knees buckled. Winding roots and lush green leaves filled the glass box.

Simon’s hands were slick and trembling. The knife felt too big in his hands. The adults were gone. They had done what they were supposed to, but he hadn’t. He was alone on the Consolidation shuttle.

Blood blossomed through the clothes on the bodies at his feet. It was so much hotter and thicker than he had thought it would be. He was covered in

it, up to his elbows. It was spilled down his front and he could feel spatters of it dripping off of his chin.

He could see drifting debris out the port window. He and the others had been sent to baptize two Consolidation shuttles, to get inside and cleanse them with flame. The two adults Simon had come with had done their jobs. They had boarded and held off the COI people, while Simon was supposed to dart in, find the reactor, and add his sun-eater to it. But he hadn't.

He wasn't supposed to be alive. The others were going to find him. They would know he hadn't done what he was supposed to. His thumb rubbed over the sheath. He could still do what he was supposed to. All of the consolidation people were dead.

The adults he had come with were dead too. They had tried to take the sun-eater from him. They had tried to make him do it.

Simon could see the access panel to the reactor. He carefully slid the knife back into the sheath beside the vial of sun-eater, reuniting all three pieces of his mother's gift.

Live first.

Simon shook his head hard trying to clear his mother's voice out of it. *She* had done what she was supposed to.

He was supposed to use the sun-eater. He was supposed to blow up this shuttle with the sun-eater. He wasn't supposed to live. He wasn't supposed to use the knife to stay alive.

A dull thud reverberated through the little ship and Simon almost tripped over the sprawled body behind him. The sound was coming from the air lock. The pallbearers from Eden had arrived to collect the bodies. He was supposed to be one of them, they were all supposed to be charred and floating out in space.

He heard a dull hiss, from the airlock. The Eden pallbearers had attached their shuttle to this one. They were coming inside. Simon was frozen, he was holding his jaw so tight it felt like his teeth were going to shatter.

The outer airlock door boomed open and he heard the pallbearers moving around inside the middle chamber. His mother's knife was in his hand again. When had he unsheathed it?

Simon knelt down among the bodies. Maybe they wouldn't see him.

The inner airlock door swung open and two pallbearers in EVA suits crashed inside.

Simon tried to stay still. His whole body was trembling. He could feel blood soaking through his shoes.

The pallbearers faltered and lowered their sharp collection hooks.

“Holy shit, it’s the kid.”

Simon was locked in place. “Hey kid. Is there anyone else—” one of the pallbearers took a step towards him.

All the tension in Simon’s body snapped, and he hoisted the knife over his head. He was screaming. He was cursing in Eden Enochian, in English, in Korean, in every way he knew. “Stay Away From Me!”

The pallbearer stopped and slowly put up her hand, the one still holding her collection hook. She used the other hand to unseal her helmet and pull it off. She crouched down. “Hey kid. You’re Simon, right?” She was easing towards him now. “Looks like you did good. Why don’t you help us clean up, and then we can go home?”

Simon wasn’t sure what happened next. He felt his legs propel him forward, he felt the knife still in his hand, he knew he was yelling, and then something hit the back of his head hard.

Simon woke up in a bed in Eden. It wasn’t his. He was in different clothes and he was clean. “Hello, my son.”

Simon turned his head and froze. The Father was sitting in a chair beside him. The room was dim, but he could make out his outline. It was impossible not to recognize The Father’s voice. Simon had never been so close to The Father before, and he had never seen him anywhere but under the Last Tree during sermons.

“Do you know why Eden was given the cherubim’s sword?” The Father asked, voice rumbling.

Simon nodded. Panic was welling in his chest. The Father knew he hadn’t used the sun-eater. He knew that Simon had failed because he was too afraid.

“Tell me my son. Why were we given the sun-eater?”

Simon’s voice came out quiet and small. “To protect the Tree?”

The Father nodded and leaned closer. He rested his clasped hands on the bed beside Simon. “You question that, my son.”

Simon felt the weight of The Father’s gaze, pulling the answer out of him.

“The tree is dead,” he whispered.

The Father hummed and leaned back. “Yes,” he said. “But our duty is not done. The Last Tree will live again. We must bear these burdens. These hardships, this anger. We must carry them.” The Father’s eyes glinted in the dark, specks of light reflecting like ghostly stars. “I’ve prayed for someone strong enough to carry this burden, Simon.” The pinholes of reflected light on The Fathers eyes burned as he recited. “'*And I will scatter them to every wind, and I will draw out a sword after them. And he shall butcher the non-believers and return their bodies to the Lord their God. And the Lord will have the sword in his keeping.*' The garden of Eden waits for the last son of Earth to join the fount of trees, for their body to become the soil.”

Simon felt The Father’s hand wrap around his wrist. He leaned close, the pale light filtering over his face. “I will keep you Simon. Will you be my sword? My Butcher?”

Simon swallowed hard. This was a calling, but it wasn’t baptism, maybe he would live. He nodded. His breath stuck in his throat. “Yes.”

The Father’s eyes gleamed in the pale light. “Agreed.”

Chapter End Notes

Listen, I'm going to be so for real. I'm mostly writing this fan fiction because I couldn't stop thinking about what's Simon's life must have been like in Eden. Like that 2 second moment in Iron Lung where child Simon is holding a knife covered in blood??? Uhh?? UHH??? This poor kid.

Chapter 18: The Cabinet

Chapter Summary: Grace tries to understand Simon's half-deconstructed religious views.

Chapter Notes: (Grace's internal monologue for the next two chapters) 'ohhhhhhh noooooo.... it was a death cult'

Grace reached out for the cover he had draped over the cabinet. He looked over at Simon sheepishly. “Full disclosure I haven’t looked at these since I put them in here.” He tugged the sheet down. I kind of forgot and—”

The inside of the glass cabinet was a web of pale green leaves and winding roots.

Simon crumpled to his knees next to him. He was whispering frantically in a language he couldn’t understand. Simon’s hand hovered an inch away from the cabinet and his whole body was shuddering. It sounded like he was praying, repeating the same phrase over and over.

“Simon!” Grace tried to pull him back, but Simon twisted away and grasped at Grace’s hand.

“Please.” Tears were pooling in his lower lashes. “Please let me touch it.”

“Wait—Do you know what this is? I don’t think—”

“Please.” Simon’s hand was trembling and his eyes were wild with a desperate want. *A need.* “Grace, please. Let me touch it.”

Grace relented and carefully opened the cabinet's hood. The air inside smelled fresh, clean. He could see just the edge of the black box's life-vest poking through the foliage. A few branches that had grown against the door tumbled gently down as it pulled away.

Simon reverently reached up to the small leaves. His fingertips only barely brushed them, like he was afraid they may shatter. He was biting back whimpers. His breath was ragged and tears cut tracks down his face.

Simon said something else in a language Grace didn’t understand before he pulled back, pressing the heel of his palm into his eyes. He was sobbing.

“Simon, what’s wrong?”

“I fucked it up. It means we’ve died. Eden won, everyone went to the fount of trees, but I wasn’t good enough, I didn’t make it.”

Grace was at a loss. He knelt beside Simon trying to make sense of what he was saying. “Simon I’m sorry I don’t know what that means.”

“The Last Tree was dead! All the trees were dead, and they weren’t coming back until all of us, *everyone* was soil.”

“Simon—” Grace tried to reach out, to touch him, but Simon batted his hand away.

“You don’t get it! We’re dead!” Simon leaned his head against the cabinet’s base. He was breathing fast, his shoulders heaving.

Grace chewed his lip and waited. After a few minutes, Simon’s breaths were shallower and he seemed to have steadied.

“Simon, when you’re ready, I'd like to use my question.”

Simon finally let Grace help him to his feet and guide him back to the table, away from the cabinet.

“Where did you find it?” Simon croaked after a long moment. “The tree.”

“With you. There were branches wrapped around you in the sub. I took a few samples and somehow… they grew.”

Simon’s face contorted in confusion. He shook his head. “That doesn’t—” his expression cleared and he seemed to look at the tree with new eyes. “The seed…” he breathed. He seemed to remember Grace was there. “I had a medallion, the one you showed me. It used to have a seed from the Last Tree.”

Grace nodded. That didn’t all make sense, but it was a start. “We found something else, not in the sub, but I wondered if you might know what it is.” Grace paced back to the cabinet and reached inside. He carefully disentangled the life-vested black box from the branches. The orange of the life-vest was brighter now, like most of the red residue had faded away.

Grace brought it carefully to the table, watching Simon’s expression crumple again. He reached out for it, pulling it across the table towards

him, and Grace let him. Simon’s knuckles turned white as he gripped the straps. Grace watched helplessly as he bit back another shuddering sob. “It didn’t—” Simon looked away, pressing his knuckles into the padding of the vest. “It didn’t make it.” He pushed the black box back to Grace. “Guess I fucked that up too.”

“Can you tell me what it is?"

Simon scrubbed at his mouth, taking unsteady breaths as he tried to keep himself together. “It’s information. The Consolidation thought they could use it to save everyone. They thought it would tell them what caused the Quiet Rapture.”

Simon gave a humourless laugh and reached out for something clipped in with the life-vest. “It’s funny what survives and what doesn’t” he murmured miserably. Grace watched Simon unclip a knife sheath from the bundle. He held it gently in his hand, and swallowed hard. Simon nodded to the black box. “If it’s here it means the Consolidation didn’t get it. Which is probably why we’re all dead, and the tree's alive again.”

Grace wasn’t sure what that meant, but he wanted to understand. "Simon, can you tell me why the tree being alive means that we’re... means that everybody is dead?”

Simon thumbed the empty sheath in his hand and recited. "*The last tree will live again. When the last Son of Eden joins the throne, there will be a fount of trees. When we die our bodies become the soil.*" He shook his head. “That’s what The Father said. That the tree would stay dead until all humans returned to the earth— became soil.” Simon let the sheath slip out of his hand and pulled away. “I didn’t think I believed that anymore, but when I saw the tree... I just... What else could it mean?”

Grace realized Simon was looking to him for an explanation. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his cardigan. “Maybe it doesn’t mean anything... Maybe it’s just a tree.”

Simon gave him a hollow laugh. “Sure, just a tree.”

Chapter End Notes: (In the original version of this fic, Simon’s ‘Eden Enochian’ is written in the Deseret Alphabet (Mormon) because it's my religious trauma/ weird hobby and why not.

Chapter 19: The Butcher

Chapter Summary: Simon tries to explain Eden to Grace. He warns him what would happen if Grace tried to interfere.

The black box sat on the table, taunting him. All Simon wanted to do was curl up and hide himself away somewhere on the ship like he was small again. But Grace was still asking him questions.

“Did the consolidation believe in the… did they believe the same thing about the Last Tree?”

“No. They would just pick the seeds off our bodies.” Simon glanced up at the small tree bursting in the glass cabinet. “They wanted to plant them. It never worked.”

Simon could feel Grace’s eyes drilling into him. He could feel Grace calculating how many questions he could ask before Simon snapped. He hated how much he had shown of himself, how little it took for him to break. He didn’t want Grace to be afraid that anything might set him off. But he was tired. Maybe, if he could just make Grace feel like he understood, give him the information he wanted, he would stop asking questions.

“Eden and the Consolidation, they had… different plans,” he began. “After the Last Tree died, Eden thought that meant… The Father said that was the sign that it was time for us— for humans— to be done, time to return to the sacred grove. But the Consolidation was trying to hold on.”

He heard Grace take in a sharp breath. “So Eden… wanted humans to die out?”

Simon repeated The Father’s words again "The last tree will live again. When the last Son of Eden joins the throne, there will be a fount of trees. When we die our bodies become the soil.”

The words felt foreign here. Here, where he was clean and warm, where his belly was full.

“Simon, is… is that what you wanted?”

"No.” Simon felt his hand clench, guilt surging. “I wanted to live.”

Simon couldn’t meet Grace’s eyes. He tried to steer the conversation away from himself. “I don’t think Eden— I doubt there’s many of us left. I don’t know how many the Consolidation has now, but when I was in— Like I told you before, I think they had maybe two hundred, maybe three?”

Grace considered that. “If we sent them information— Whatever we can pull from the black box, and the information we have about the stars, astrophage and the taumoeba. Would they listen?”

Simon could hear Ava’s screaming through the submarine’s speaker, the desperation for anything the black box could tell them.

“The Consolidation would.”

Grace leaned closer, his brow knitted. “And Eden?”

"I think… I think they would do anything they could to stop you."

Grace didn’t like that answer. “What would Eden try to do?” He asked.

Simon couldn’t think of anything to explain what Eden was without divulging the life he had lived, and the things he had done to keep living it.

Grace was still looking at him expectantly.

“I—” He picked at the straps of the life vest. “Eden’s people— The Father chooses you. It’s a calling, to… The Father sends you to bring bodies back to become soil for the Last Tree. Most of the time when Eden people go out… they come back as bodies too.”

Grace’s eyes on him were too much, but he needed to understand what Eden would do to them, if Grace took the *Hail Mary* there. “They don’t want anybody to be left. They’ll do whatever it takes to get to the fount of trees. Grace, if you do anything to help the Consolidation, if you send them information. The Father—”

The Father would have sent *him*. If Simon was still there and if Grace had arrived trying to save the stars… if Grace helped the Consolidation, The Father would have sent Simon. And Simon would have gone. And Simon would have been The Father’s Butcher. If he was still in Eden, Simon would have done anything to live through it one more time, so he could go back to The Father and wait to be used again.

“The Father has—He has people. A few of them he keeps. One of them… they call him the Butcher.”

Coward

Simon kept going “When The Father sends you out, you don’t come back, but The Butcher, he just kept surviving it. He kept coming home and The Father… just kept sending him out. The Butcher shredded through people, The COI’s people, people in Eden, whoever The Father said needed to be soil. *That’s* who The Father would send to kill you. And he’d do it.”

“…Soil?”

Grace still wasn't getting it. Simon tried to keep his voice level. “For the *tree*. The tree of life, the world tree. That’s the tree Eden has… That's what The Father said it was.”

Grace was quiet for a long time. “The Butcher…Is he the one who—Did he… hurt you?”

Never you. You were never the poor bastartd in the Butcher’s hands.

“No.”

Grace was silent for a moment. “Simon, we have to try.”

“You don’t understand. Eden doesn’t think humans are worth saving.”

“Why? Why not?”

Simon tried to find the words. “We just *aren’t*.” His frustration was mounting. All that time praying, all that time hoping. He had spent so many years pleading to whatever God was above The Father’s head to bring back the stars, to make it stop.

Simon finally spit out what he meant. “Because if we were worth saving, someone would have saved us.”

Grace looked like Simon had hit him. After an eternity he said. “We can’t take the *Hail Mary* back there, we don’t have enough fuel. But what we *can* do is send probes. We’ll point them towards the Consolidation and Eden, as close as we can get. And what they do is up to them.”

Grace rested his hands on the table. “I wonder if maybe… if Eden heard it coming from you, from one of them … if they’d listen.”

“They won’t.”

“Try anyway.”

Chapter 20: Rations

Chapter Summary: Grace let's slip that they're running out of food. He has to explain that he was never going to make it back to Earth.

“Okay.” Grace clapped his hands together. “Here’s how I see it. We’ve got a few problems but all of them either have a solution or something we can do in the meantime.”

Now that Rocky was awake it was time to get them all on the same page and pitch his idea of building copy-cat beetle probes to send to the WISE 0855-0714 system.

“I have schematics,” Grace said, flipping a laptop open. “They don’t have to be exactly the same as the ones I sent to Earth, they just need to be able to hold info, and some taumeoba. Oh, and we’ll need to build two. One for Eden, and one for the Consolidation.”

Grace turned the laptop around, and Rocky held up his light translator.

“Do you think you could build something like this, Rock?”

There was a special warble Rocky did when he was being snarky. He was doing it now *“Easy.”*

“Great.” Grace turned to Simon who was seated on the other side of the table. “Okay, then next problem: Contamination. The xenonite is holding, but the uh… What did you call it, Simon?”

“Blood moon?”

“Right the blood-moon… blood… is still seeping through the hull around it. We can decontam regularly until we figure that out fully.”

Grace was on a roll, mentally checking off the life-and-death chores that were rattling around in his brain. “Next, the black box.” He turned back to Simon “You said you accessed it before?”

“There’s a computer in the sub. It connects somehow.” Simon said.

“Okay doable. I’ll do an EVA, see if I can get it power, and we’ll go from there. We’ll want to include whatever information is in the black box when we send WISE 0855-0714 the probes. It may also have an answer to our

contamination problem.” Grace mentally checked another item off the doom list.

“Okay last problem. Food. We’ve got enough for now, but with all the stopping and starting we’ve lost time and—”Simon stiffened and Grace could have kicked himself. He hadn’t told Simon that they had limited supplies yet. This isn’t how he wanted him to find out.

“We’re running out of food?”“

We still have plenty for now!” He tried to assure him. “We… we just will need more than we currently have to get to Erid.”

“You didn’t think I should fucking know that?”

“Nono! I—I didn’t want you to worry. There's a solution, we can eat Taumeoba, it’s just…” Grace trailed off.

Simon’s eyes were burning into him. “What else don’t I know?”

Grace quickly paced back to the table. “Nothing, you know everything we know now. I promise.”

Simon was grinding his jaw. Grace could see he had his hand wrapped tight around the edge of his chair. “Please, just— don’t lie to me.”

Rocky clicked indignantly *“Rocky never lie, only Grace lie.”*

Grace was floundering. “I didn’t lie, I just didn’t—”

Rocky cut in *“No. Grace lie when tell Rocky that Grace go back to Earth. Later, Rocky learn Grace not go back to Earth. Earth not send enough fuel for Grace to go home. Grace plan to die in space. Not tell Rocky.”*

Grace tried to regain control of the conversation. “That’s why we have limited supplies. It was supposed to be a one-way trip—”

Simon blinked and looked up at him. “It was an execution.”

“No nono! It was just…”

He could feel Stratt’s calm controlled stare from nearly six lightyears away. *Sit down and we do this differently.*

“It was just that Earth couldn’t make enough fuel for two ways.” Grace could feel the dead grass under his fingers. “The crew knew— We knew it was a one-way trip.”

“Now Erid way!” Rocky chimed in, a little too enthusiastically.

Grace nodded “A lot has happened since then! Rocky offered some of his astrophage, so then I *was* going to make it home. But then the taumeoba ate through the xenonite and... long story short we’ll probably never see Earth again. I’m sorry, I should have... I should have realized you didn’t know, because I didn’t tell you.” Grace laughed weakly. “I guess I just got used to the idea and... it’s not fun to think about living on borrowed time.”

Simon’s intense stare was boring into Grace, absorbing every word. “You volunteered.”

“Grace very brave.”

“Dr. Grace. You’re a coward and you’re full of shit.” Stratt’s fist was clenched on her desk and she looked off to the side, seething. “If you really cared so much about the children, you’d get on that ship without hesitation. You could save billions of them from the apocalypse instead of preparing hundreds of them for it.”

“No- It’s not about—”

“You think I don’t know you?” Stratt asked incredulously. “You’re a coward and you always have been. You abandoned a promising scientific career because people didn’t like a paper you wrote. You retreated to the safety of children who worship you for being the cool teacher. You don’t have a romantic partner in your life because that would mean you might suffer heartbreak—”

“I’m not going. Get the next person on the list, that Paraguayan chemist. She wants to go!”

Stratt placed her hands on the table. Her expression suddenly controlled and level. “I don’t care who wants to go. I care who’s qualified. That’s you. I know you’re afraid. I know you don’t want to die. But you’re going.”

Grace had to get out of there. He’d seen Stratt use her authority before, but not like this.

“I’m sorry, but you just can’t talk me into it. I’m leaving now,” Grace said.

The door was just a few feet away. If he could just get through it and into the hall, he wouldn't be alone with her. He could get somebody between them and—

“I’m not trying to talk you into anything.” Stratt said. “I am trying to make you understand what I’m about to do next.” She turned to the door and gestured to someone. "Come in.” Stratt turned back to Grace, her face unreadable. “Stay calm”

Someone was stepping through the door, a doctor. There were three Russian officers behind him. Grace pushed back from the desk, “What is this?”

“Mission plan will state that we induced your coma early to maximize your safety. You will be remembered as a hero.”

Grace backed away trying to put the furniture in between him and the men who were entering. “Come on. This is crazy.”

Stratt’s words were distant. This wasn’t happening. This couldn’t be happening

“This may seem like me betraying you, but it’s actually me believing in you,” she said.

“Sure feels like you’re betraying me.” Grace had backed himself into a corner. There was nowhere to go.

“Don’t make this harder, please.”

Grace held up his hands trying to talk his way out of this. “I won't do it!” He choked out. “I’ll sabotage the mission!”

Stratt shook her head “No you won’t. When you wake up, you’ll be good and angry. I’m sure Yáo and Ilyukhina will be pretty mad about what I did. But in the end, you’ll all three be out there, and you’ll do your job.”

Grace’s mind was racing. He needed to convince her. He needed to prove he couldn’t be trusted. “Try me! Go on! See what happens! I’ll scuttle the ship. You kill me? Fine! I’ll kill your mission!”

The officers were getting closer. The doctor was lingering by the door, his expression blank.

Stratt sighed and Grace saw her come around her desk out of the corner of his eye. “I’m ninety-nine percent sure you’ll do the right thing.” She spread her hands. “But I can’t rely on ninety-nine percent, can I? The French DGSE

has perfected a drug that causes retrograde amnesia. Your med bed will give you a nice dose of it before you wake up. By the time your amnesia wears off, you, Yáo and Ilyukhina will have already sent the beetles back. And if not, my guess is you'll be too far invested in the project to give up."

Grace's throat burned. "You can't do this!" He threw the nearest, heaviest item of decor he could find and scrambled up onto the counter.

He had to escape. If he could just get out of this room.

Stratt was still talking and her voice was still so measured. "Sit down and we do it differently."

He didn't. He ran.

"So, our supplies are limited?" Simon confirmed, leaning his elbow on the table.

"For now," Grace said, coming back to the conversation. "I'm sure there's a solution, and even if we keep eating at our current rate we'll have enough for a year or so."

Simon nodded. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Grace swallowed. "No, I promise. You know everything we know."

Simon nodded again and stood up from his chair. "Yeah."

He left and Grace and Rocky were left looking at each other, unsure if the conversation was over. Simon reappeared with his arm loaded with a wrapped blanket. He lowered it to the table and its contents spilled out. It was at least half of all the food Grace had given Simon since he'd arrived. The food Grace had assumed he had been eating. Simon had been stashing it.

Simon shifted uncomfortably. "Habit."

Grace looked up at him, mouth gaping. "Does this help at all?" Simon asked.

Graces shook his head, searching for words. "It- it does. But you should be eating—"

“I’m not a stranger to rationing.” Simon was walking away again. “I’ll do the decontam. You two do… whatever you do.”

Chapter End Notes: Simon and Grace casually not disclosing their respective greatest 'sins' of being the Butcher, and having not actually volunteers. I'm sure this won't come up later. >:)

Chapter 21: Good Thing It Was You

Chapter Summary: Simon explores the Hail Mary, and compares his life with what he understands of Grace's. Rocky and Simon bond.

Chapter Notes: This is the last plot-only chapter today. We get to the good stuff in the next chapter (Kissing). Thank you for your patience. I tend to get lost in the lore/plot and forget what I came here to do. (Which was make fictional men kiss.)

Simon wandered the ship with a bottle of cleaner solution and a handful of rags from the lab.

He hadn't found much of anything. There was the obvious spot above the airlock, but that was behind a xenonite barrier so Simon just scrubbed around the edges as best he could, and hucked the used rag out the airlock. He found a few other stray red splotches, but mostly what he found was normal human mess. Scuffs, random gunk, weird stains, and general clutter.

Grace was a fucking mess. At least Grace had one flaw. Not that it mattered; Grace was still an infinitely better person than Simon had ever been.

Simon's rescuer had apparently shot himself out into space, knowing he would die and was just fine with that. Grace had saved Earth. He had saved Simon, and now that he knew about Eden and the Consolidation, he was dropping everything to save them too.

The only times Simon had ever tried to do the right thing, he had only done it to save his own skin. He had of course, fucked it up, and failed to *actually* do the right thing both times. But he had still somehow managed to save himself.

Simon had tried to stop what happened on Filament Station. Failed. But somehow, was still one of the few that survived.

He had taken the deal to go down in that fucking sub, failed to get Ava the black box, but still, he had made it back out alive.

Simon was alive. He wasn't supposed to be. He had been living on borrowed time since his first baptism. But here he was.

Funny how some things survive and others don't.

Simon huddled against the wall of his cell on the Consolidation’s station. He wasn’t sure which station, and he had no reason to ask. Even if he thought he’d get an answer. Most of his questions so far had been met with a swift kick or spit flying in his direction.

Not that he didn’t deserve it.

The cold metal of the wall soothed the raw skin on his neck. They had burned off his tattoo, leaving an angry palm sized patch of open wound and blisters. His whole body ached. He hadn’t let them take the tattoo easily, and he had gotten a beating for it. In hindsight he wasn’t sure why he had fought so hard to keep Eden’s mark. He wasn’t one of them anymore. He had faltered.

Simon shuffled a few inches down the steel wall. The spot he had been leaning against had warmed up with his contact, and the burn was hot and angry again.

There was something happening down the hall. Someone was screaming. Someone was always screaming.

He couldn’t make out what they were saying, just the warble of their voice. With the cadence, it might have been something in Eden Enochian, but it didn’t matter. Simon’s hearing had never recovered after the blast on Filament, and everything sounded like he was underwater, which suited him fine. He didn’t feel particularly interested in being present anyway.

A shadow passed in front of his cell. Simon ignored it, opting to study the ceiling and trace his fingers around his empty sheath. There was always someone gawking in at him or the other poor fuckers in this stretch of the cell block. They sometimes had questions, but usually it was one of the people who had lost someone on Filament who wanted to make sure 'the Eden fucks’ knew that if they were in charge, Simon and the rest of them would have been tossed out the airlock already.

The shadow didn’t budge and Simon lowered his gaze preparing himself for whatever this was going to be.

There was a woman with a device riffling through files. She had dark hair

pulled back in tight braids, and was wearing a tidy uniform. It looked like she was here on business, rather than the pleasure of shouting at the POWs.

She rapped her knuckles on the bars of Simon's cell without looking up. "Eyes up convict." She said and gestured vaguely. "Approach the bars and present your hands, left here, right here."

Simon complied, wincing as the effort of standing up inflamed the taut skin on his neck and the mosaic of bruises he had earned.

He put his hands between the bars where the woman had gestured, and she deftly affixed the handcuffs before returning her attention to her device.

Simon waited, resisting the urge to lean against the bars to take the weight off his aching legs. He watched the woman's lips carefully. The Consolidation wasn't very patient when their answers were met with 'huh?'

"Name?" The woman asked.

"Simon."

The woman scrolled up and down on her device, evidently looking for something missing. "No last name?"

"No."

"Eden people," she muttered. "Not that it matters. Okay Simon, I've got a deal for you, I just need you to confirm some things for me."

Simon felt his chest tighten. This wasn't a good sign.

The screamer from down the hall let out another howl, and the woman gestured for someone out of sight to take care of it.

She continued. "You surrendered on Filament and you've been mostly cooperative, that's why you get this option. You also said you had piloting experience when we asked about what skills you could offer the Consolidation. Is that true?"

Simon nodded.

"Good, what kinds of vessels?"

Simon swallowed. "Small craft— shuttles, some experience with larger cargo craft."

She made a note on her device. “Alright. Well, thanks to you and your friends on Filament we’ve got the fuel you didn’t deton—” She wiped her mouth as she talked and Simon missed what she was saying for a moment. “— so we can get back to that system and resume the survey. We’ll put you on the next ship, and they’ll explain the rest to you there.”

She was turning to leave, already gesturing for someone to come collect him.

“Wait, you want me to fly the ship?”

She barked a laugh. “If I have any say, you’ll never see the cockpit of anything space-ready ever again. No. You’ll be piloting a terrestrial vessel.”

***

Simon popped his head into the *Hail Mary’s* cockpit. He hadn’t found any contaminants on this level, but he was curious. The cockpit looked so pristine, (aside from a smattering of colorful candies that had been spilled all over the floor. A green package wedged in the pilot’s seat read ‘Skittles’... whatever the fuck that was.)

Every ship Simon had ever flown was a deteriorated scavenged mess, but this was sleek. All of the controls had their original labels and all of the panels matched. Every seam was aligned, and it looked like it was all made from the same materials.

He let his fingers glide appreciatively over one of the panels before he sighed and forced himself to start digging up the Skittle crud on the ground.

He could live with all the other messes on the *Hail Mary*, but a cockpit was sacred.

Something clattered behind him and he jumped.

“Fucking hell.”

It was just Rocky rolling his ball into the room.

“Sorry, not mean to scare.”

“It’s fine.” Simon caught his breath and waved his hand. “What do you need?”

“Rocky ask question. Question?”

Simon would have really liked to say no, but he also really wanted Rocky to like him. Simon nodded and grit his teeth, preparing for whatever this conversation was going to bring.

“Simon have crew?”

Simon paused and crouched back down to keep scraping the stubborn sticky blob he was working on. This wasn’t the line of questioning he had been expecting.

“I— not really. In the sub?”

“Or on bigger ship. Rocky and Grace had crew. Gone. Simon have crew? Question?”

Simon shook his head. “I’ve had… a few. Never for very long.” Simon thought of all the baptisms, all the bodies he had carried to the tree. He thought for a moment and added “…But I did have my Brothers. Not like, real brothers, we… had the same calling.”

The Father had collected boys, Simon, Adam, and Isaiah had been among his favorites.

“Crew gone?”

Flashing lights and sirens slammed into his brain. Adam’s hair was still tangled in his hands. Isaiah was shouting at him. *You can still come to the grove, Simon! We can go together! Don’t just stand there! Do something!*

Simon blinked away the fireball and cleared his throat. “Yeah… Yeah, they’re gone,”

Rocky offered a low hum. “Sad. Sad. Sad. Rocky understand.”

“Sorry, Rock.” Simon sat back back against the wall. “What happened to your crew?”

“Eridians not know about radiation. Crew get sick. Rocky not know why.” Rocky arranged his legs and sat down in his ball. “Grace tell Rocky later that engine-room, where Rocky work, more protected.”

Simon nodded. “I’m sorry.”

Rocky hummed quietly. “What happen to Simon crews. How Simon alone. Question?”

“I uh…” There was a knot forming in Simon’s throat. “I didn’t do my job right. They… they did, but I was the one who lived.”

Rocky was quiet for a long moment, his claw hands fidgeting. “Wonder sometimes if different crewmate live, not Rocky, They save Erid’s star faster. Not need wait forty years.”

“Forty years?”

“Earth years. Rocky at Tau Ceti forty years, cannot solve astrophage. Until Grace. Grace and Rocky solve together. But long time for Erid to wait. Other crewmate would solve faster.”

That hung in the air for a while. It seemed like the *Hail Mary* was chock full of people who shouldn’t have made it.

Simon tested the waters. “Could Grace have solved it alone?”

Rocky tilted his carapace, his claws quieting.. “… No. Rocky not think so. Needed both of us to solve.”

“Good thing it was you then.”

It was hard to read Rocky’s ‘expression,’ he didn’t have a face. He hoped that wasn’t the wrong thing to say.

“It…” Rocky sank lower, pressing into the ground. His humming became low and uneven, Simon didn’t know if any of the notes were words, if they were, he didn’t know what they meant. He might have crossed a line. Simon didn’t know why Rocky was telling him about his crew. That might have been the wrong thing to say.

“Sorry,” he said, his stomach twisting.

His alien companion was swaying slightly on his base, back and forth. *“No. No sorry… Feeling… need word—”* His carapace clattered slightly. *“Before felt angry”* Simon could only understand part of what Rocky was saying. The rest was low humming. *”Feel Shame.— Now hurts less.”* His legs curled under him and Simon could catch a few words among the notes Rocky was singing “*Not think of that before. —Only sad before. Sad that it was me.”*

That hung between them a moment until Rocky’s hitching chorus quieted.

Rocky slid his ball closer and leaned against Simon’s leg. *“Glad it was Simon. Glad we find Simon.”*

It wasn’t the same, nobody needed him “I…” Simon started.

Rocky reached his claw through the malleable panel on his biosphere and rested it on Simon’s leg. *“Glad, glad, glad Simon here.”*

Chapter 22: "Can I...?"

Chapter Summary: Grace finally works up the nerve to ask Simon for... more. He is surprised by his response.

⚠This chapter contains smut. See end notes for skip-to lines and summary if you are uncomfortable with this content.

*Chapter Notes: *Holds your face* Timid top Grace. Gruff bottom Simon. See my vision. (Also I LOVE when slow burn is just a dam breaking.) Also this is the end of the chapter hurricane I will be taking a nap now. I'll be back tomorrow with a normal (1) one chapter. Thank you for reading!*

Grace was having floor-time in the lab again. It wasn't helping.

His view of the ceiling was offering no new perspectives, and his back was starting to hurt. He needed to solve this contamination problem. The blood-moon gunk from the *SM-13* was still seeping around the xenonite barrier they had tried to put up.

He also needed to figure out how to get the information off of the black box so they could put it in two new probes. They couldn't just slap the black box into the probe unopened. They needed two copies so both the Consolidation and Eden had a chance.

AND on top of everything, he still needed to figure out their food supply problem.

He had a lot of pressing work that needed to be done *yesterday,* but he couldn't think. Well, he could *think* but not about any of the pressing, life or death matters that needed his attention. Instead, all he could think about was Simon.

It took a lot to get Grace... 'riled-up'. The few times he had ever given anyone a second-glance, they had already been a dear friend and by then Grace had generally decided it wasn't worth the risk. Which made this worse. It was like he had no immune system for this, and these *feelings* were just ripping through him. He had no way to cope.

Grace wished he could say he was a perfect gentleman, but he wanted more and more from Simon. Every time they touched, even just to brush past each other, or the moments that Grace would wake up with Simon pressed

against him, it just made him want more. He was drunk on wanting, and it made it impossible to get anything done.

He just kept running circles around the same conversations in his head. Hypothetical scenarios where Grace asks Simon for... what it was he wanted, and then thinking himself dizzy imagining every possible outcome. Versions where Simon says no, versions where Simon says yes, versions where Simon says yes because he thinks he *has to* or Grace would throw him out the airlock or something.

Grace groaned and slapped his hands on the floor next to him.

This was dumb.

Grace needed to just get this over with. He just needed to go find Simon and ask him....ask Simon... whatever ever it was he was going to ask him.

Then Grace could follow the steps of 1.) Get rejected, and then 2.) he could channel the inevitable rejection spiral into burying himself in his work. Just like college.

He had actually written the paper that had landed on Stratt's desk to soothe his bruised ego after... Mark.

Grace squirmed. This was going to suck.

He forced himself to stand up and pointed threateningly at the contaminant samples. "I'll be back for you."

Grace found Simon in the 'holodeck' room. He was swiping around visualizations of Rocky's Hubble Bubble data. It looked like he was comparing the *Hail Mary's* scans of WISE 0855-0714 to Rocky's more recent ones. Which was pretty interesting actually— but Grace was on a mission, and he wasn't here to talk about data.

Grace cleared his throat in the doorway and Simon glanced over at him.

"Can I ask you something?" Grace started.

Simon raised an eyebrow and dismissed the projections on the walls. He looked wary, which made sense. Usually Grace asking questions meant a

long conversation about Eden or the Consolidation, or some other horrible thing Simon didn't want to talk about.

Grace opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He closed it again. He should have thought of what he actually wanted to say.

Simon wariness turned to bemusement. "Sorry, didn't get that."

Grace opened his mouth again. He was just going to have to say what came to mind. "So— actually before I ask, just know that—So this is not—Okay, actually, let me start by saying—"

Simon's eyebrows had migrated upwards. He was tilting his head to the side like that might help him make sense of Grace's bumbling.

"It's not a trade!" Grace blathered. "—what I'm asking. You can say no. You should say no—I think I just need to hear it so I can stop—Just don't feel like you have to do anything. This really isn't something I should even be—"

Simon put up his hand. "What's the question, Grace?"

This was such a bad idea, but he couldn't bail now. Grace swallowed around the ball forming in his throat and stared at his feet. "I was just... going to ask if maybe you'd... let me kiss you—"

Simon was on him before Grace had even finished the 'oo' in you. Simon's mouth was pressed against Graces, open and hungry. His hand wrapped around Grace's shoulder pulling him close. His warm hand squeezed the back of Grace's neck and the contact pulled at something deep under Grace's skin, bringing it tingling to the surface.

Grace didn't have time to think before his hands were already tangled in Simon's long hair. His fingers twisted into the stray locks that had escaped the scavenged hair tie.

Simon's lips on his felt starving and frantic. Grace felt crazy. He felt like he was on drugs. He felt like he was burning and drowning at the same time.

Simon pulled back suddenly. He disentangled his hand from the back of Grace's neck, and he steadied himself on the projection wall behind Grace. Simon's body was still blocking him in and Grace caught a crazed look in his eyes before Simon ducked his head down.

Simon sounded breathless when, after a moment, he finally asked "Was a kiss all you wanted?"

No. No it wasn't. But it was already more than he should have asked for.

"No." Grace heard himself whisper.

Simon's eyes flicked up to Grace's lips, and Grace repeated. "No, I—"

Simon seemed rooted in place, hungry eyes locked on Grace's lips.

Grace's fingers slipped, unbidden by him, under the hem of Simon's shirt. He could feel the waistband of his pants and the warmth of his skin.

Grace swallowed hard. "Can I ask you… for more?"

"Ask me." Simon's eyes flashed up from Grace's lips and hungrily met his gaze. "For anything."

Grace's pinky slipped just under Simon's waistband, feeling the smooth skin underneath. Simon shuddered and leaned in close, his arm wrapping possessively around Grace's waist. He could feel Simon's hips press against his own.

The inside of Grace's brain was all dial-tone. Grace wanted. So badly. He felt like he was hooked up to a generator. His skin was buzzy and suddenly so sensitive. The *want* was so all-encompassing, so unfocused. He couldn't ask for anything, he wanted *everything.* He wanted to tear Simon's clothes off. He wanted to bend him over. He wanted Simon's mouth on his lips, on his dick, on his neck. He wanted everything at once.

"Ask me, Grace" Simon's voice was lilting now. "I'll give it to you."

That sent Grace over the edge. His brain was shut down, and it would not be coming back online anytime soon. Grace's fingers delved further past Simon's waistband. "Can I…?"

Simon's mouth pressed against Grace's, and he felt Simon slide his fingers between their bodies and tug Grace's pants down.

Grace fumbled, taking both of their dicks into his hand and began stroking them together. Simon gasped in Grace's mouth.

The fingers of Grace's other hand pushed up under Simon's shirt sliding over warm skin. He traced the few bandages that remained, the hard-earned muscle, and the softer places of Simon's stomach and chest.

Simon was begging against Grace’s mouth. “Tell me what to do, I’ll do it.”

Grace broke away tugging at Simon's shirt. “Take this off?” he whispered.

Simon obliged instantly, reaching back over his head to tug at the collar. He raised his arm obediently to let Grace take it the rest of the way over his head.

Simon’s hand took over, stroking Grace’s dick and his own. He pressed himself against Grace’s body, kissing him hard and backing him into the wall.

Grace gasped, his hands finding purchase on Simon’s rolling hips. He could feel his own tip, wet and rubbing against his stomach as Simon stroked them off. Simon’s breath was hot and urgent in Grace’s mouth.

“Wait— Wait” Grace gasped, and Simon pulled away reluctantly, wrapping his hand around Grace’s hip.

Simon’s eyes were glossy and drunk with pleasure. The stubbornness Grace had gotten used to, was all but gone, but there was still ferocity in them. Despite being the one apparently dolling out orders, Grace felt like he was being dragged along for the ride by Simon’s burning, pleading expression.

“We shouldn’t—” Grace gasped. “This isn’t right I’m taking advantage—”

Simon’s expression soured, returning to a familiar glower. “You think you could make me do something I didn’t want to do?”

“You’re injured, I – I brought you aboard and you—”

Simon cut him off, his expression unreadable. “Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yes, but I—”

In an instant Grace’s legs were swept out from under him and he was suddenly sprawled on his back. The wind was knocked out of him, and Simon was straddling him with a satisfied expression on his face.

“Then fuck me,” he said. “And tell me what you want.”

Grace was stunned, his breath still returning to his shocked lungs. “I—” He gasped “I didn’t expect you to like being told what to do?”

Simon leaned in and kissed Grace’s neck. Grace felt the soft vibration of Simon’s thoughtful ‘hmmm’ on his skin.

“I’ve been told I ‘require a firm hand’,” he said. “But I usually do what I’m asked.”

“Usually?”

Simon paused to pull Grace’s collar down so he could kiss his collarbone. “Usually.” Simon repeated.

“Human throat clearing noise.” Rocky said from the doorway.

Grace nearly jumped out of his skin. “AH! Rocky, how long have you been standing there?”

“Human’s eating each other. Question?”

Grace panicked “No! NO! We—It’s—”

Simon was laughing. He threw his discarded shirt at Rocky. “You fucking know what this is, you asshole. You've seen *Star Trek.* Those fuckers bone all the time.”

Rocky waggled his arms, chittering. “Rocky joke! Glad humans mate! Happy, happy, happy. Now continue, Rocky take notes.”

Grace buried his face in his hands, mortified. “No!”

*Chapter End Notes: *Bangs pots and pans* Happy Pride!*

To skip smut stop at: “Ask me.” Simon’s eyes flashed up from Grace’s lips and hungrily met his gaze. “For anything.” and skip to: “Human throat clearing noise.” Rocky said from the doorway.

What you'll skip: They're kissing and other things and Grace is like 'ah! I really want to have sex with you' but he's over-thinking and worried that he's taking advantage of Simon. Simon is like 'You seriously think you could make me do something I don't want to do?' And side sweeps Grace's legs and is like 'fuck me you dumb-ass'

Chapter 23: Behavioral Observations

Chapter Summary: Rocky's humans are mating, he's sure of it. He just isn't sure how to tell if they're actually mates yet. Further data is needed.

Chapter Notes: He's a little confused, but he's got the spirit.

Rocky currently had three main engineering tasks:

1.) Build some sort of power modulator to connect to the *SM-13's* thinking machine. Once they got that online they could break into the black box data. Easy, almost done.

2.) Build two 'beetle' probes to send taumeoba and info to Simon's humans. Less easy, but also almost done.

3.) Figure out a way to stop blood-moon contamination from leaking through the hull. Not easy. No progress.

Which was why Rocky was spending his afternoon on a personal research project.

The two humans onboard were mating, and Rocky was determined to get good field-notes about what the process entailed. Grace was not making it easy, citing a need for 'privacy'. (Which was rude. Rocky would let Grace watch him and Adrian lay eggs if his mate were here.)

Not all hope was lost though. Luckily, Rocky had *some* information. He and Grace had exchanged the basics about each of their species when they were still in the Tau Ceti system, which included some info about each of their means of reproduction. Humans were apparently dimorphic, and some kinds of humans can't produce offspring together. (Which was bonkers.) Rocky had inquired, and apparently Simon and Grace would not be able to make baby humans. (Which was stupid.)

Rocky had been able to confirm all of this with Grace, but what Grace had failed to mention was the 'mating-madness' that Rocky had observed in both Grace and Simon. They were being weird, weird, weird.

Even just asking each of them if they were now mates had elicited very different responses. According to Rocky’s perfect notes and perfect memory, Grace’s response when asked had been: “What?! No nono- No that’s— I mean I’d love to but, no. Probably Simon is— We’re just— Sometimes, humans mate without… *being mate’s*, you know?” Simon’s response to the same inquiry was: “Yeah? I guess.”

There was definitely more data needed.

Normally, when Eridians mate there are clear indications. In the early stages of courtship adornments are exchanged, and later etchings are added to both (or more) mate's carapaces. Additional notes are also added to each of the mate's name songs once mating is official. Part of the reason Rocky's full name was so long, was because he had taken on a lot of Adrian's name notes, which they had inherited from their five clutch-parents.

Rocky didn't think humans had a direct equivalent, but he was keeping a careful eye on the things the humans were handing to each other. So far most of the objects they had exchanged were normal things: Tools, bedding, food items, etc. (If any of those had mating significance, Rocky and Grace would have been mated a very long time ago. So, Rocky didn't think they were part of the ritual.) They *had* however been in increasingly close in proximity to each other, particularly during sleep, and during the pre-sleep phase Grace called 'chilling'. This also came with a significant increase of physical contact.

It had started with their hands touching, then their hands touching more of each other with longer durations of contact, and now when they slept they were generally entangled completely.

Grace had been… resistant to Rocky watching him sleep directly on top of him when they first met. Over time Grace had made clear he preferred that Rocky watch him sleep from some feet away. This contact between Simon and Grace seemed significant. It was Rocky's theory that the duration of contact, and the intimacy/location of contact was correlated to how close the humans were to mating. Rocky thought they might be getting close to re-initiating the full mating ritual soon and he didn't want to miss it. Rocky was currently observing the humans from a distance. They were on the bottom level of the ship, and Rocky had made himself comfortable in the lab, listening to their vibrations and taking notes.

“So…”Grace said. He and Simon were tidying up the med-suite/human sleeping room. Simon was busy with the task of rebuilding a pile of cushions and blankets. The humans had been sleeping in this way since Simon

arrived. That was a change from how Grace used to sleep, though Rocky wasn't sure it had anything to do with mating.

“There are real beds, if you want to stop sleeping on the floor.” Grace said.

“Hm?” Simon looked up, but didn’t stop working on his task.

“They are more like bunks but... Here, look.” Grace pressed a button and the two undamaged bunks extended out from the wall. “Right, sorry I broke one.” Simon said.

“Water under the bridge, and it works out fine, there’s only two of us.” Grace said.

Simon paused looking down at the pile of blankets and cushions he was arranging. “Floor's fine.”

Rocky could see Grace squirming slightly; his heart rate had jumped a bit too. “Right. I just— I noticed you were combining our two... blanket piles? Thought that maybe meant you wanted something softer?

”Simon glanced over at Grace. “Takes up less space if it’s just one.”

The two humans were quiet for a moment.“...And you’ve ended up in my pile the last couple nights so I thought…” Simon trailed off.

“Right.” Grace said.

The humans were just staring at each other, blinking again. Rocky wondered if this was part of the process somehow. They did a lot of blinking at each other.

Simon gestured to the still extended bunks behind Grace. “Or we could —”“No! The floor is great!”

“I mean, if you don’t want—”

“Nope! Love it!” Grace hurriedly retracted the bunks and rushed over to help Simon with the bedding.

Rocky hummed thoughtfully. Grace hadn’t mentioned the nesting behavior.

Chapter 24: Fuckin' Aliens

Chapter Summary: Simon discovers how the Eden/Consolidation humans made it so far out into space. Grace is exhausted but say's he can't sleep. Simon offers to... tire him out.

⚠This chapter contains smut. See end notes for skip-to lines and summary if you are uncomfortable with this content.

Simon and Grace had settled for the night. Rocky was up in the lab, and had reluctantly agreed that the humans could ‘watch each other sleep.’ There was a lot of work to do and it made sense to take things in shifts, so someone was always in the lab. They needed to figure out what to do with the blood contamination, and the million other things that seemed to be going wrong.

It was nice to just be with Grace. Simon *fucking loved* Rocky, but privacy was at a premium around here, and Simon was hoping they could finish what they had started in the ‘holodeck.’

Despite being off for the night, Grace still had a laptop on his knees and was plugging away at something.

Simon was half watching *Star Trek* on the tablet, and waiting (im)patiently for his turn. The last few nights they had gotten in a routine of Simon laying his head in Grace’s lap. Grace would run his finger through Simon’s hair while they watched the show, and it was like drugs.

Simon had never had anything like this before. Back in Eden he had fooled around briefly with Adam and Isaiah, two other favorite 'sons' of The Father. Adam had liked ordering him around, and Simon had been eager to please. The reversal of their usual roles had been a relief in those stolen moments. When the three of them were sneaking off to a maintenance shaft, Simon wasn’t dolling out the orders or enforcing The Father’s will. He could turn off his brain and let himself be passed between Adam and Isaiah. They had both been generous with their commands, and even more generous in rewarding Simon for following them. It had felt so good to earn praise for something other than pain.

It had been short lived though. All three of them belonged to The Father. There hadn’t been room for anything else.

Something on the show caught Simon’s attention. Captain Picard’s warm voice was introducing the plot.

“Captain's log, Stardate 43385.6. We are orbiting Barzan Two, which is entertaining bids for control of what appears to be a stable wormhole, which could provide a permanent shortcut to the distant Gamma Quadrant —”

Simon scrambled to pause it, his eyes wide. “That’s how we got out there.”

“What?” Grace glanced up, confused.

“Eden and the Consolidation!” Simon rewound and played Picard’s voice again.

“—what appears to be a stable wormhole, which could provide a permanent shortcut to the distant Gamma Quadrant—”

Grace nodded slowly, and Simon got the impression that even in the world of *Star Trek,* the idea of a stable worm hole was dubious.

“It’s pretty unlikely…” Grace started. “Though, since I’ve been out here I’ve found out that a noble gas can be a solid, and rocks could talk so… Maybe?”

Simon looked down at the screen, this felt like less of a revelation now, but it still felt right.

Grace continued. “That could explain why your group didn’t experience time relative to Earth or the *Hail Mary*... but, I’m sorry there’s no way to really know.” Grace rubbed his eyes “Sorry, I… you could be right, I’m just—” he waved his hand vaguely, “tired. Stuff’s just not making any sense right now.”

He did look exhausted.

“Maybe sleep?” Simon suggested. “Might make more sense if your brain was working.”

Grace side-eyed him. “You sound like Rocky.”

Simon shrugged. “Rocky’s a pretty smart rock. Good advice.”

Grace sighed and pushed the laptop aside. (Simon resisted the urge to immediately take its place on Grace's lap.)

“I don’t think I can sleep.” Grace said sheepishly. “There’s so much to do, and I’m really bad at sleeping unless I burn myself out enough to just—” Grace dramatically flopped back and stuck his tongue out.

“I could tire you out.”

Grace cracked his eyes open, confused.

Simon jacked off the air with his hand.

“OH!” Grace flushed and covered his face. “Oh! Right, uhhh…” he sat up, his face still reddening. “I mean if you want to— I mean I would love—”

Simon slowly swung his legs over Grace’s and straddled him. Grace was still babbling. “—but we don’t have to do that if— I mean, you’ve made it clear you want to, but I— I want to too, but… in case you didn’t…. I thought I’d just make sure you…” He trailed off.

“You done?”

Grace swallowed, but didn’t answer.

“We don’t have to—”Simon started to swing himself off of Grace’s lap.

“No wait!” Grace’s hands flew to Simon’s hips, pulling him back down. He could feel Grace’s cock stiffening under him.

Simon settled back and waited, holding Grace’s gaze. Their faces were so close, and Simon could see Grace’s eyes darting down to his lips and back.

Simon leaned in slowly, stopping an inch short so Grace would have to close the difference.

“Are you sure this is alright?” Grace whispered.

Simon’s brain was already slipping out of gear and into a comfortable empty space. He nodded, and Grace pressed his lips to Simon’s, tentative at first but his urgency grew.

Simon leaned into him, making himself pliable as Grace’s hands wrapped around to him to pull him closer.

Grace was breathing him in, pressing his mouth to his and kissing him deeply. His hands drifted up Simon’s back, tugging his shirt up and greedily touching the bare skin underneath.

His hands were warm, and so much softer than Simon was used to. Grace's hands were gentle and free of calluses. They roved under Simon's shirt, brushing admiringly over his chest and down his sides. They squeezed and Simon felt like he could melt in them.

"Tell me what you want." Simon murmured against Grace's lips. "*Please."* He felt desperately needy. He wanted to earn Grace's praise; he wanted to shut his brain all the way off, and let Grace have whatever he wanted.

Grace hesitated and Simon could practically hear the buzzing coming out of his ears. He didn't seem to have much experience dolling out orders.

Simon tugged the hem of his own shirt up slightly. "This?" He suggested, his voice coming out half-breath.

Grace nodded, and Simon challenged. "Tell me."

Grace's grip tightened around Simon's waist and his eyes flashed briefly with understanding. "Take it off." He said.

Simon obliged, his stomach flopping giddily as he tugged it over his head.

Grace leaned in and kissed down Simon's neck. He planted lingering kisses across his chest before his hands tentatively probed under Simon's waistband. "These too."

Fuck yes. Finally, Grace was getting it.

Simon extracted himself off of Grace's lap and pulled off his pants. Grace watched wide eyed, pupils blown out while he hastily stood and undressed himself too.

Simon waited, presenting himself and offering a silent challenge. Grace had to come to him.

And he did.

Grace practically threw himself at him. One of Grace's hands wrapped around his back, the other trailed down to Simon's cock. Simon gasped appreciatively into Grace's open mouthed kiss as he stroked him.

Grace pulled back, only barely, his eyes were drunk with pleasure and want, but he whispered. "Promise— you'll tell me, if I ask for too much."

Simon watched his lips, trying to tug his brain back into gear enough to answer it. He managed a half-sarcastic "Like you could make me do anything."

That seemed to satisfy Grace enough. He pulled Simon against himself and kissed him, firm and slow. Their dicks were pressing against each other. Simon could feel his twitching, and Grace's tip was slick against his stomach.

Simon let his fingertips explore Grace's body, sliding up his side and down his back. He was leaner than Simon was, but he had apparently been hiding some muscle under the cardigans he was always wearing.

Grace's hand found its way to Simon's cock again. He stroked him and Simon brushed his fingers down the trail of hair that led to Grace's dick. Grace shuttered under his touch and moaned. His rhythm stroking Simon turned stilted as he squirmed. Grace was apparently *very* sensitive.

Simon devoted himself to coaxing more gasps from Grace. He stroked, twisting his wrist slightly and let his thumb trail over Grace's tip. He was rewarded with a moan and Simon followed that high. He kissed down Grace's neck, and lowered himself to his knees.

Grace met his gaze, eyes wide but drunk with want. His dick was standing hard and twitched under Simon's touch. Simon ran his fingertips down its smooth length and took it into his mouth. He felt Grace shudder, and he let out a shaky gasp.

Simon put his lips and tongue to work, sucking and caressing Grace's cock. He was basking in the sounds he was making. Moans half-muffled by closed lips.

Simon realized Grace's hands were hovering, unsure. He slid his hand up Grace's thigh and guided Grace's fingers to his hair. Simon willed Grace to curl his fingers in it.

Show me how you like it.

Grace's hand curled in Simon's hair, and the other found its way around his face. Grace's thumb caressed up and down Simon's jaw. There were strange patches of numbness where the scars were thickest on Simons cheek, but the light touch was sending electricity through his body. Simon leaned in, inviting Grace to pull, to force him to take him deeper into his throat.

He was rewarded with a half moaned *"Oh god, Simon"* and a firm tug. Grace guided Simon's mouth up and down his length, and Simon followed the rhythm enthusiastically, letting his mind sink further and further into the ecstatic numbness.

The sounds Grace was making were glorious. Low moans cut with whimpers. Simon could feel him stiffening, his hips arching. Simon took Grace’s dick as deep into his throat as he could. He put his lips and tongue to work, chasing those sounds.

Grace let out a low keening moan and came hard, pulsing in Simon’s mouth. Grace’s grip in his hair loosened and Simon took one last self-satisfied pull on Grace’s dick before swallowing and looking up. Grace’s expression was glassy, and warm.

Simon had done good.

Grace took a shuddering breath and shook his head like he was trying to clear it. “Come here,” he said, taking Simon’s hand and helping him off his knees.

He led Simon to the wall where the bunks were retracted, and pressed a button. One of them slid out and Grace guided Simon to sit on the edge. Simon wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but he wasn’t about to ask questions now that he had finally coaxed Grace into taking charge.

Grace kneeled down between Simon’s knees. He wrapped one hand around Simon’s thigh, and the other around his cock. Grace stroked him while he slowly kissed up Simon's inner thigh. He shuddered as Grace took him into his mouth. Grace’s warm hands wrapped around Simon’s hip bones and he pulled him further to the edge of the bunk. Simon obeyed, happily pliable and melting into his touch.

Teetering on the edge of the bunk, Simon steadied himself on his hand as Grace’s fingers caressed his balls and his mouth pleasured him.

Grace’s head bobbed between his legs. His lips, and teeth, and tongue worked to incredible effect. Simon moaned, bucking involuntarily as Grace coaxed more and more tingling pleasure with his mouth.

Grace’s hands were wrapped around his hips again, caressing up and down the sensitive skin. His fingers, lips, and tongue were working in sync, and Simon could feel himself getting closer. He had intended to draw this out. He didn't want this to end, but all the weeks of being pent up, and the things Grace was doing to him weren't giving him a choice.

“Oh fuck, Grace.”

A tremor wracked through Simon’s body as he spent in Grace’s mouth. His back arched and his thoughts sputtered out entirely. It was just Grace. It was just this moment, and he didn’t need to know anything else.

Simon fell back against the wall behind the bunk panting. Grace wiped his mouth and looked up at him with a pleased smile.

“Holy shit, Grace.” Simon breathed.

Grace laughed and hauled himself up next to Simon. “Listen, I’m glad I did it right. I watched some tutorials in college, but never really got a chance to try it.”

Simon wasn’t sure what that meant, but didn’t really care.

Simon leaned his head against Grace’s shoulder, still catching his breath. Grace wrapped an arm around him and they fell into a comfortable silence.

Simon’s brain slowly hummed back to life and he realized he didn’t know what to do now. Up to this point, every stolen moment in a maintenance hatch ended with Simon needing to carefully extricate himself and his companions so they wouldn’t get caught. It was a clear set of steps that always ended the exchange but now… they were both just… here.

There wouldn’t be an unspoken agreement to never mention it. This moment wasn’t walled off from whatever conversations happened next. That was suddenly terrifying.

Simon didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do. If he was still in Eden, having an unsanctioned romp with Adam and Isaiah, they would be planning their staggered exits by now.

Simon’s hand curled around Grace’s, suddenly stricken by the idea that Grace may get up and walk away. That they would pretend this hadn't happened.

Simon pulled his head off of Grace’s shoulder. “I don’t know how to do this,” he said, in numb realization.

“What? Sex?”

“No, I obviously know how to fucking have—” His face burned and he tried not to show it. “I don’t know how to...” He waved his hand between the two of them. “I don’t know what to do with... this. It's never been an option for me.”

Grace's expression turned, and he carefully admitted, "I've… I've never gotten it right."

Neither of them knew what they were doing. What if they fucked it up? Maybe Simon shouldn't have pushed this. Simon didn't know why but he heard himself whisper. "Try anyway."

Rocky's voice carried from just outside the room, causing both Simon and Grace to jump. *"Humans done mating now. Question? Rocky come in."* He rolled tentatively into the room. *"Rocky understand privacy. Rocky wait."* He held up a note taking device. *"Now Rocky ask if mouth secondary sex organ. Question?"*

Simon laughed and buried his face in Grace's side. "Fuckin' aliens."

Rocky was interrogating Grace on the ins and outs of human sex. Simon was gleefully watching the conversation from the sidelines, comfortably wrapped in a colorful quilt.

Grace had put his pants back on and was doing his best to get Rocky to let the topic drop. He stood in front of Rocky's habitat with his head in his hands.

"No. No understand. Do puppet show." Rocky said gesturing to the collection of anatomical figurines he had shoved into the exchange box. He had apparently made them for this specific occasion.

Grace was looking up at the ceiling like some godly force would intervene on his behalf "I'm not going to—"

"The man asked you for a show, Grace" Simon called over. Simon was deeply curious at how far this shipwreck of a conversation could go.

Rocky agreed readily. "Important for science. And Rocky will stop asking questions, if Rocky understand…" he reasoned.

Grace groaned and reluctantly took the figurines from the exchange box.

Rocky wiggled three of his appendages, and settled as close to Grace as he could get. *"Yes, show time"*

Grace held the figurines with a defeated expression, “What do you want to know.”

“How mating appendages function. Rocky note Simon mating appendage is 12% longer than Grace, does this affect function. Question?”

Simon bit his lip hard to suppress a laugh. He only partially succeeded.

At Simon’s snort, Grace set the figurines down. “You know what? Never mind, no questions at this time. I’m just gonna find you a sex-ed video on the archive.”

Chapter End Notes

To skip smut, stop at: “I could tire you out.”
and skip to: Grace laughed and hauled himself up next to Simon. “Listen, I’m glad I did it right. I watched some tutorials in college, but never really got a chance to try it.”

Chapter 25: A Scientist, an Engineer, and a Pilot

Chapter Summary: The boiz are having lab time when something else inevitably goes wrong. Simon takes the wheel.

*Chapter Notes: *Puts a blender on the counter and looks at the camera like I'm in the office.**

The trio was in the lab. All of their sleep schedules had aligned, and they were trying to figure out a solution to any of their billion problems. Rocky was making good headway on the copy-cat beetle probes, and now all they needed was the info to put inside them. They had taumeoba, and a copy of everything Grace had sent back to Earth, but they still needed whatever was inside *SM-13*'s black box.They had abandoned the idea of trying to route power out to the *SM-13* itself. Instead they had assembled a new computer inside the lab, and were currently working on getting the computer and the black box to talk to each other. They were connected, but so far it refused to give them access to any of its data. They had tried a few passwords, but Simon couldn't remember the admin code so all they had gotten was:

Insufficient privileges. Leave the area immediately or surrender yourself to- Insufficient privileges. Leave the area immediately or surrender yourself to council authority. Insufficient privileges. Leave the area immediately or surrender yourself to council authority.

That got annoying fast.

Luckily, in Stratt's infinite wisdom, she had uploaded the entirety of human knowledge to the *Hail Mary's* archive. Simon and Rocky were both learning "Hacking 101," and they were learning surprisingly fast. Well, maybe not surprisingly. Coding was just another language, and Simon was apparently hard-wired to absorb those like a sponge, and Rocky was basically super genius. Regardless, the code would take time to work. Simon and Rocky had put together an automatic program that would run through all possible number + letter combinations. It would break them in eventually; they just needed to wait.

Grace was currently scrolling through the *Hail Mary's* archive, looking for anything that might give them a clue about the blood-moon contaminant. So

far, he had just learned a lot about some really messed-up bloodborne pathogens back on Earth. Yikes.

Simon sneezed and rubbed his nose.

Rocky straightened up in his bubble *“Fuck what. Question?!”*

“It’s a sneeze,” Grace said. “Bless you, Simon.”

Simon looked up at him baffled. “The fuck?”

“What?”

Simon blinked at him. “Are you a fucking priest or something?

“What? No? It’s just— What do people in Eden say when people sneeze?”

“Nothing??”

Rocky wiggled impatiently. “Need word. What fuck? Why Simon’s face and lungs expel?”

Grace was once again deeply aware that he and his companions had very different lived experiences. “I told you, it’s a sneeze.”

“Yeah and. Question?” Rocky said still wiggling. “What fuck that. Question?”

Grace pulled his glasses down and scrubbed at his face. “Uhhh… If particulates get in our nose, it irritates our system and our body expels it. It’s involuntary.”

“Stuff can get inside?? So humans leaky out and leaky in?”

*“*Yeah, bud. That’s why contamination has been such a concern. We can’t all be closed systems like Eridians.” Grace paused. “Do you really not have anything like that? When you—after Adrian you had gunk in your vents, do you never need to expel anything?”

“No. Reabsorb. Only open when eat and excrete. Closest thing is old superstition. You can blow bad… need word, luck? Feeling? Curse? Like this.”

Rocky rattled his carapace and made a dense chorus of trumpeting noises.

“… Bless you.” Simon said.

Mary’s crisp voice came over the intercom. **Blip N detected.**

“Rocky hope Eridian this time. Or nicer human.”

Simon barked a laugh and pointed at Rocky amicably. “Oh, you got jokes now? That’s the last time I help unspool your xenonite for you.”

Rocky chittered, and Grace tuned out the quips Simon and Rocky were throwing back and forth. He stood to go. It was probably just an asteroid, or some random space debris. They had encountered a lot of those. Still, he should go check in on the display in the cockpit.

Blip O detected.

Simon stood up, glancing at Grace.

Blip P detect—

Blip Q det—

Blip R de—

Blip S—Blip—Blip—Bli—

The *Hail Mary* was detecting blips faster than the automated voice could announce them.

“Oh shit.” Simon was already out the door. Grace dashed after him.

It was probably a glitch. It had to be. Despite what sci-fi movies would lead you to believe, the distance between debris in asteroid belts was generally enormous. There was almost no way that they could have come up on a debris field this tight and not have realized it. Almost no way.

Blip W detected. Blip—

There was a rattling, screeching sound and the *Hail Mary* bucked. Grace’s feet lost contact with the floor and he slammed into the ceiling. He floundered in the air before he careened back down as the ship's speed oscillated.

Front sensor array offline. Auto pilot disengaging.

“Grace!” Simon was picking himself off the ground. “We need to get to the cockpit!” He hauled Grace up, and tugged him towards the ladder. “Rocky! Are you—” Simon started.

“Okay!” Rocky skittered in his tunnel overhead.

Blip Y det—

Grace touched his fingers to his temple. They came away slick and red. He tasted metal.

Simon half led, half lifted Grace onto the ladder. **Blip Z detected. Blip A.1 det—**

The displays in the cockpit were a mess of warnings and blanks. Grace froze in the doorway. This couldn’t be happening. Simon pulled himself into the cockpit behind him. “Grace! We’ve got to—” Simon’s voice faded into a distant rumble. There was no forward sensor array. The cupola in the cock pit faced the side. They were blind. Grace couldn’t do anything if he couldn’t see where they were going.

Simon was shaking his shoulder. “Grace, is there a stern sensor array!? Can we see backwards?”

Grace nodded numbly and pointed at one of the few screens still displaying anything. Simon brushed past him and threw himself into the pilot’s seat.

Pilot detected.

How the fuck does it know I’m a pilot!?” Simon shouted over his shoulder as he swiveled to flip one of the switches above him. His hand was flying over controls. He was only pausing to read labels and pull screens closer.

“You’re a pilot?!” Grace managed.

Blip B.2 detect—

Something else grazed off the hull, thundering, and the *Hail Mary* jerked to the side.

“Is this pitch or yaw?!” Simon asked urgently. His hand hovered over the joystick.

“What!?”

“Fuck it. Hold on!”

Simon slammed back on the controls, and gravity flipped. They spun in a tight loop, and the ceiling became the floor, and the floor became the ceiling. Grace slammed upwards knocking into Rocky.

“Fucking *hold on*!” Simon yelled. He swiveled his chair and pulled the display for the rear sensor array closer.

They were flying backwards. He was using their inertia to propel them so the nose of the ship with the broken sensor array was in the back, and the stern of the ship with the intact sensors was leading.

“Simon, you’re a genius!” Grace exclaimed, still plastered to the ceiling.

“Shut up! We still might die.” Simon veered hard to the left, his controls mirrored to their actual movement.

The computer was still announcing new blips, but it was so constant it was just a rapid drum beat of **B—b—b—b—b—b—b—b—b—b—b—b—**

Simon was relying entirely on the rear sensor array, weaving them between the hurdling blips on the map.

Grace watched Simon’s whole-body torque itself in the chair, fighting against the upside-down gravity to stay seated. He had hooked one of his feet under the chair, as his hand flurried around the cockpit. He was flipping switches that Grace had never figured out the purpose of. Grace also had to assume this wasn’t their intended purpose.

“Oh, Fuck ME!” Simon yelled.

There was a new wave of blips on the display. A thick wall of debris coming at them fast.

Simon kneed the joystick down and swiped at a display. The rear sensor display switched to a cross section from another angle.

“Grace, grab Rocky and fucking HOLD ON this time!”

The gravity in the cockpit turned on its head again. The G-force of the spin smacked Grace’s head against the wall and he felt the air squeeze out of his lungs.

Grace blinked and he was on the ground again. Gravity had normalized and Mary’s automated voice was silent.

Simon was standing, bent over behind the pilot's chair. Grace heard the sound of him retching and gagging, followed by the splatter of his dinner hitting the floor.

Rocky wobbled upright beside him. *“Simon better pilot than Grace.”*

***

Once everyone’s heads had stopped spinning, the three of them regrouped in the airlock corridor.

All the jarring in the debris field had taken its toll. In addition to the missing front sensor array, there was damage to the cable faring on one side.

Miraculously though, the *SM-13* was still perfectly adhered... and still leaking blood moon contamination.

Some of the xenonite barrier they had installed to seal off the contaminants had pulled away from the wall. There was now a small pocket, in-between the barrier and the hull, that was currently filling with a viscous pool of blood-moon goo.

Grace put his hands on his hips. “Well, it didn’t breach entirely. It’s not *all* bad!”

Almost simultaneously, Simon and Rocky replied:

“It fucking sucks.”

“Is full bad.”

A small dribble of contamination slid down from the edge of the xenonite barrier and over the airlock window.

“Yeah...” Grace scrubbed at his face with his hands trying to think of a solution. “Could we— *ow*—” He winced as his fingers brushed over the swelling goose-egg on his head. “Could we... I don’t know, put a big xenonite box around this whole area?”

“Not enough xenonite.”

“And if a box that big filled with this stuff, the weight of it would probably put strain on the hull.” Simon added.

Grace sighed. He couldn’t think of any other solutions.

“Alright, well… It's a controlled leak for now. We’ll just keep decontam-ing until we figure this out.” He turned to Simon. “Let’s get the food, and everything else up on the lab level. That will at least get it out of the way of any drips that make their way down.”

All they had was band-aid fixes until they figured out what killed the contamination. He just had to hope they'd figure it out soon.

Chapter 26: Debris

Chapter Summary: Grace, Simon, and Rocky make repairs and investigate the debris field. Simon sees the SM-13 again.

Chapter Notes: Oh boy! Let's find out what fucked up our ship! :)

“I’m fucking coming with you.” Simon said firmly.

Both he and Grace were in EVA suits, waiting for the inner airlock to cycle open. They had stopped the ship at a safe distance from the debris field to do repairs, and Simon was insistent that he come help.

“Okay,” Grace conceded. “I just wanted to check.”

The inner airlock door slid open and Grace pulled himself inside, followed closely by Simon. They had tied one of Simon’s EVA suit-sleeves into his belt and the elbow drooped out, giving him a perpetually perturbed hand-on-hip look.

“Simon and Grace be careful. Statement.” Rocky’s voice hummed over the comms.

“We will, Rock. Are you all set to talk us through repairs?”

“Rocky ready.”

The inner airlock closed and the decompression cycle started with a dull hiss. Simon was already clipping tethers to his belt. This didn’t seem like his first rodeo.

They had two main tasks on the hull. Repair the front sensor array, and walk the full length of the *Hail Mary* to check for any other damage. Grace also wanted to get a good look at whatever the heck that debris field had been. Their remaining sensors had shown them that it was tightly packed in a wide radius around one of the nearby planets. It was densest close to the atmosphere, and thinned out farther away, but the range was massive.

The outer airlock slid open and Grace pulled himself out onto the hull. The planet loomed below and the debris field around it glittered. He could barely see the planet through it, it was so thick.

The debris didn’t look natural. Massive reflective panels surrounded the planet, tilting at odd angles. Thousands of dark shapes, he could only guess were once satellites, drifted around in orbit. They looked old. Haunted.

“Rocky, the debris looks man-made.” Grace spluttered.

“More humans. Question?”

“No, no. Sorry, *somebody*-made. It doesn’t look like human or Eridian materials.” Grace tried to make sense of what he was seeing. This would explain why the debris field had been so tight.

Simon had pulled himself up beside Grace on the hull. “We’re not getting any signals are we?” He asked.

“No, no signals. No sign of power.” Rocky said over the comm.

The *Hail Mary* would have alerted them immediately if they were emitting radio waves or light signals of any kind, and he trusted Rocky’s sensors to pick up anything on the planets surface.

Grace held himself steady on the hull. His feet were floating thousands of miles above the planet. The dead planet. The obscured surface below was frozen, and it must have been dead long enough for all the machines its people had built to go silent.

When Grace and Rocky had still been in the Tau Ceti system, Grace had commented on the massive coincidence it was that humans and Eridians had roughly the same level of technology. Rocky had pointed out: “Has to be, or Grace and Rocky not meet. If planet has more science, it can understand and destroy astrophage without leaving home system. Eridian and human science both in special range: Can make ship, but can’t solve astrophage problem.”

And if a planet didn’t have the technology to build a ship, or solve the astrophage problem…the planet below was the result.

Whoever had lived here had the ability to send *things* to space, but for some reason they couldn’t come out here themselves. Maybe their species couldn’t handle the intense G-forces to leave the atmosphere, maybe they were too big to fit in a rocket, maybe they didn’t know how to build life support systems… Grace would never know.

This is what would have happened to Earth, this is what would happen to Erid if they didn’t get there in time.

“Rocky, did you and your crew see this on your way to Tau Ceti?” Grace asked.

“No, came different way. Different angle with Grace.”

Simon was watching Grace carefully. “You okay?”

Grace swallowed. “Yeah, yeah…I…”

Simon studied him. “Is this what you were telling me about? The astrophage dimming a star enough that the planets around it freeze?”

Grace nodded and barely managed to whisper. “I think it’s… I think they’re dead. Whoever they were.”

Simon looked back down towards the planet. He tapped his fingers to his heart reverently and whispered something in a language Grace didn’t understand.

Over the comm Rocky let out a low hum, long and wilting. It sounded like the low octaves of grief he had sung after telling Grace about his crew.

Grace felt numb. They couldn’t do anything. They didn’t have enough taumeoba on the whole ship to make a dent in their Petrova line, and they didn’t have enough resources to make enough to do anything. Even if they could, it wouldn’t matter. This planet had been frozen for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” Grace whispered.

Simon had come closer. He held tight to his tether and drifted gently in front of Grace, blocking his view of the planet.

“Is there anything we can do?” he asked. He seemed to already know the answer.

“No.” Grace said.

Simon nodded and tilted his head towards the nose of the *Hail Mary.* “Then, it’s time to make repairs.”

Grace let Simon guide him around to the other side of the hull, towards the front sensor array. Simon seemed to have intentionally led them to the opposite side, so the planet was partially obscured, and the *SM-13* was out of sight.

Grace winced. Seeing the sub couldn’t have been easy. He’d have to check-in on him later though. Rocky was already starting to instruct them on how

to repair the front sensor array, or what was left of it. The array was a mangled mess. Half of it was gone, and what was left was hanging on by a thread.

Grace got to work and Simon hovered near-by, handing Grace what he needed and helping to attach the replacement parts Rocky had fabricated. Rocky was giving them step by step directions from inside. He was probably right under them in the nose of the ship, looking through the hull.

Between each step, Grace could see Simon scanning the endless horizon around them, like he was waiting for something.

“What’s wrong?” Grace asked.

Simon took his eyes off the sky. He was biting the inside of his cheek. “Before, I thought the debris field… I thought it might have been…” he cleared his throat. “Never mind.”

“Talking to Rocky?”

“No, sorry,” Grace said over the comm. “Was that the last step?”

“Yes. Sensor array will work—at least little work now.”

“Thanks Rock. We’ll walk around out here and make sure there isn’t any other damage.”

“Rocky already tell Grace about all damage.”

Right, Rocky could see the whole hull with his sonar vision.

“I think I’d like to look too, I trust you. But it will make me feel better, human thing.” Grace said.

“How much O2 time Grace and Simon have. Question?”

Grace checked. “We’re both good for another five hours.

”Rocky paused. He probably didn’t like them being out here after Grace had run out of oxygen last time. *“Okay, do human thing,”* he said finally. *“Then Grace and Simon come back inside.”*

Grace and Simon walked the full length of the hull in a corkscrew path. They skirted around the *SM-13* and Grace decided not to mention it. He trusted that Rocky had taken a long, hard listen to the hull in that section. And if Rocky said it was intact, it was intact.

They reached the back of the ship, and Grace's brain felt much less itchy now that he had visually confirmed everything was fine. Aside from the sensor array, some minor damage to the cable faring's casing, and some cosmetic scrapes, the *Hail Mary* was perfectly okay.

Rocky's humming voice came over the comm. "Done doing human thing. Question? Friends Grace and Simon come inside now. Question?

"Yeah, I think we're good out here." Grace said. "We'll head back now. See you in a second, bud."

Grace adjusted his tether and started making his way back towards the airlock.

Simon was hesitating. "We haven't checked around the sub," he said.

"We don't have to—" Grace started.

"We do." Simon's face was unreadable as he clipped his tether to the next rung and pushed off towards it.

Grace followed as quickly as he could. Simon obviously had more experience in zero-G than he did and was deftly maneuvering around the hull.

They made their way around the side of the *Hail Mary,* and the *SM-13* came looming into view. They were coming at it from the top rather than from below. Grace hadn't seen the sub from this angle before.

There was a hatch on top. It looked like it had been welded shut, and Grace guessed it was lucky the rupture in the side had been big enough for Grace him to get inside. He never would have been able to get in if it was intact. The welded hatch gave him an uneasy feeling. The more he learned about Simon's life, and how he got here, it only seemed to get worse.

Simon slowed up ahead. He was carefully scanning the *Hail Mary's* hull and making his way closer to the *SM-13*. Grace did the same, though he was studying Simon more than he was the ship.

"Rocky can see through from the inside." Grace tried. "He's sure there's no damage."

Simon didn’t say anything. He was almost on top of the sub now. He was approaching carefully, like he was worried it might come to life.

“Simon, you don’t have to look.” Grace said.

“I think I do.” Simon shot an unconvincing smile over his shoulder to Grace. “Human thing.”

Simon tentatively stepped on to the sub’s hull. His grip on his tether was taut and Grace could see him trembling slightly. This was important to him. Grace stepped up to where Simon’s tether was clipped to the hull, and wrapped a hand around it. Simon looked back, and nodded appreciatively. Grace wouldn’t stop him, but he could at least show Simon he was here, and he would pull him back if something happened.

Simon slowed to a stop, peering inside the *SM-13’s* ruptured hull. He stayed there for a long moment, not moving. Grace could only hear his breathing over the comm.

Grace didn’t know what to say. He never knew what to say.

Rocky’s voice came in. *“Simon looking for something. Question?”* He hummed softly.

“I don’t know, Rock.” Simon answered. Grace couldn’t see his face, but he could hear the tightness in his voice. Simon adjusted his grip on his lead and crouched down. “I… It’s not how I remember it,” he told Rocky.

“Simon want to talk while look. Question? Not know if that would help. Not know if human thing and Eridian thing. To talk to not be scared.”

Grace heard Simon’s breath catch over the comm. After a moment he said “Y-yeah, I’d like to talk.”

“What Simon see?”

“It’s so… empty. I thought it would be full of blood— the contaminant. I was drowning in it.” Simon looked over his shoulder towards Grace. “Was there more before?”

Grace followed Simon up on the hull and peered inside. There were still patches of half frozen red gunk lining the walls, but there was far less than there had been. “There was more before.” Grace confirmed.

What was left of the contaminants in the *SM-13* seemed to have collected on the far wall, where the sub was attached to the *Hail Mary.* The ball of branches seemed to have shifted slightly too, pressing in towards their ship.

Rocky chimed in. "Contaminant collecting between hulls."

Was it making an intelligent effort to get inside? Or was it attracted to the *Hail Mary's* environment for some reason?

Simon reached down and brushed a gloved hand over the pale leafless branches. "Is this…Is this what you brought in? The tree?"

Grace nodded. "Yes— I'm sorry, I don't think we should bring in more. We don't know if it's contaminated too."

Simon nodded, his gloved fingers still lingering on the branch. He whispered something in a language Grace didn't understand. After a long moment he straightened up and nodded to Grace. "Can we knock the sub off the *Hail Mary*?"

Grace shook his head, and Rocky answered over the comm. *"Two ships glued together with xenonite. No way to remove without decompressing Hail Mary or leaving some of SM-13 attached."*

They lingered there on the sub's hull. Simon was staring into the dark. His eyes paused over the faint outline of the speaker mounted to the wall, and the cracked port window.

Over the comm, Rocky gently prompted. *"Simon ready to come inside now. Question?"*

Simon took a long slow breath and took a step back. "Yeah. I'm ready to come in, Rock."

Chapter 27: The Tiger and the Rice Cakes

Chapter Summary: Grace is needs sleep but his brain won't turn off. Simon offers an old story that his mom used to tell him.

The lab was now a combination kitchen, bedroom, laboratory, and mental breakdown zone. That last one wasn't entirely true yet, but it felt like it was well on its way.

Grace and Simon hadn't slept at all and Rocky had just dropped, so the humans were on watch duty.

They had made very little progress. The black box hack program was about two-thirds through the possible password combinations, and *of course* the last combination it tried would be the right one.

Grace was loading up samples of the blood-moon contamination with a bunch or random compounds to see if any of them had any effect. So far, the failures included nitrogen, ammonia, mercury (from a thermometer Grace broke), acetate, alkylbenzene sulfonates, ethoxylated alcohols, and about a fifty other chemicals he had access to or could synthesize.

In a fit of rage he had tried blasting it with X-rays a few dozen times. It didn't do anything.

So far all he had been able to figure out was that the contamination was self-replicating and self-sustaining. It didn't have any food source Grace could find, so he couldn't starve it. And unless he poked each individual cell with a microneedle to pop them, he had no way to kill it.

Simon was trying to help as best he could, he was wicked smart, but at the end of the day Grace was the molecular biologist, and Simon had learned what a cell was like two weeks ago.

It was on Grace to figure this one out. Which sucked, because the only possibly helpful thing he had discovered was that each cell had a lot of energy stored inside. Like a LOT! It seemed like it might be a cousin to astrophage. It didn't have the same scoot to toot use for the stored up energy though, and it seemed to devote all its time to reproducing (and driving Grace crazy).

Star Trek was droning in the background. Grace had put it on with the excuse that he 'worked better with background noise' but truthfully...

Grace had never experienced the more hallucinatory side effects of sleep deprivation, but in the last day or two he had started seeing stuff out of the corner of his eye, and he could swear he was hearing things. Little things, footsteps... What finally made him turn on the show, was he could have sworn he heard Stratt's voice from out in the corridor.

Grace rubbed his eyes. He couldn't think straight, and he didn't want to fuck up whatever it was he was working on. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure what he was doing. He capped the sample jar he was holding and pushed back from the counter.

He needed sleep.

Simon looked up from where he was sitting in the makeshift blanket bed. "You good?" He asked, and set aside the xenonite project he was unspooling for Rocky.

Grace plunked down next to him and wiggled his hands in an imitation of Rocky "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"How hard did you hit your head?" Simon joked, brushing back some of Grace's hair to get a look at his goose-egg.

"Ha ha." Grace mumbled humourlessly. "Just need sleep."

Simon tossed a blanket over Grace's legs. "I'll watch."

Grace leaned back. His eyes were so heavy but there was a weird buzzing in his brain, and he could already tell it was going to take forever to fall asleep.

He heard Simon pause the *Star Trek* episode and set the tablet down. Grace suppressed a wince as the silence of the room returned. He could feel the edges of his brain trying to fill the quiet. He really didn't want to hear Stratt again.

"Can we just chat for a sec?"

Simon leaned back beside him. "Uh…yeah. What about?"

Grace shook his head. "Anything, tell me about—" He paused. Asking about Simon's home would be loaded, asking him about himself had similarly never gone well, and asking about work was… nothing.

"…anything." Grace finally finished. He could feel Simon's gaze on the side of his face. He shouldn't have asked. This was dumb.

“Just talk to you till you fall asleep?”

Grace nodded, simultaneously relieved and embarrassed that Simon understood why he was asking.

“Uhhh,” Simon looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “Shit, this is hard.” He gestured around the lab. “Everything we talk about is fucked up.”

Grace huffed a laugh, closing his eyes. At least the feeling was mutual. “It’s okay you don’t—”

“No no, I got it. My mom used to tell me this one about…” He held up his hand in warning “Listen, it’s gonna be stupid, but hopefully you’ll be asleep for most of it.”

Grace cracked an eye open. “Are you going to tell me a bedtime story?”

Simon put his hand over Grace’s face. “Not if you’re a dick about it. Shut up.”

“Okay okay,” Grace waved Simon’s hand off and settled against him.

“Right, okay let me remember…” Simon wrapped his arm around Grace and leaned back, thinking. “So there was this old woman, and she had been at a festival or something—I don’t remember— Anyway, she’s walking home at night with some rice cakes for her kids, and this big fucking tiger appears in the path." He gave a warm chuckle. "My mom would always do this *raaaa*, sound when the tiger appeared." The roar was just a breathy whisper.

"Anyway, the tiger sees the rice cakes and he wants them. So, this tiger, he says ‘What do you have there?’ and the lady says ‘rice cakes, for my children.’”

Simon’s fingers were tracing small circles on Grace’s shoulder.

“Anyway, the tiger makes the lady give him one, saying that he’ll leave her alone. Or, if she doesn’t give him a rice cake, he’ll eat *her* instead. So she had no choice. She gives him one of the rice cakes and continues on her way home. And then…. Shit—” Simon paused, apparently trying to remember. “Oh! But then, the tiger is a dick and he just moves farther up the road and gets in the way again."

Now that both Grace and Simon had been still for a while, the lab lights timed out. They faded with a click, and the room fell into a comfortable dark. Grace could feel himself being lulled by Simon’s warmth and the soft rumbling of his voice.

“On the next hill, he makes her give him another rice cake. And the tiger keeps doing this, until finally she doesn’t have any more… I forgot about this part… uh— the old lady tells him ‘I don’t have any rice cakes, they’re all gone.’ And the tiger says ‘then cut off one of your arms and give it to me.’”

Simon’s hand slowed to a stop on Grace’s shoulder.

“The lady doesn’t want to, but the tiger says it’s ‘either I eat your arm or I eat all of you’ so… she does. She gives him one arm and tries to keep going but the tiger is on the path again. And then he takes her other arm, but she’s still alive, and she’ll make it home to her kids, so it’s worth it to her.”

Simon’s hand was tracing up and down Grace’s arm again, but his voice sounded distant, like he had forgotten he was the one telling the story.

“So she keeps going but the tiger is on the path again. Now he wants a leg, and the lady is scared ‘how will I get home if I give you a leg?’ The tiger says the same thing— that it’s either she gives up a leg, or he eats all of her. So she gives it to him and tries to hop home. But she doesn’t get far and the tiger is back, and he’s smiling, asking for her last leg”. Simon paused for a long moment.

“And the lady, the mom, says ‘Please, how will I take care of my children…’ And the tiger says ‘I will.’” Simon trailed off and Grace felt him shift slightly to look down at him. “You asleep yet?” He asked quietly.

It didn’t sound like Simon wanted to finish this story. Grace didn’t want to make him. Grace kept his eyes shut and tried to take long slow breaths, pretending to be asleep. He wasn’t far off anyway.

Simon relaxed and pulled Grace tighter. “Thank fuck.”

Chapter End Notes: Source of story: https://folklore.usc.edu/korean-bed-time-story/. Go check it out! The folklore archives are tight as fuck!

Chapter 28: Give All

Chapter Summary: Simon hears familiar voices in the dark. He thinks he knows how to save Grace and the Hail Mary from what he brought with him.

*Chapter Notes: Listen, shit is about to get really fucked up for a handful of chapters. I need you to know everybody is going to be okay eventually. Okay? Okay. *plugs in blender**

Simon blinked in the dark. Grace had settled, and had been snoring softly in the crook of his shoulder for about an hour. Simon had been trying to get his mom's story out of his head the whole time.

Had she known what The Father was doing? Whittling away at people until they were gone, so he could snatch up the kids they left behind? It was probably just a story. His mom had been a believer. She had been devout. She had gone willingly. Hadn't she?

Grace shifted slightly in his sleep, but settled again still leaning into him. Simon could make out the soft outline of Rocky's carapace in the dark. He seemed to still be asleep too.

Simon wasn't entirely sure why they all needed to watch each other sleep, but he'd be lying if he said it wasn't comforting. He liked not being alone, and he was glad they both trusted him enough to let them watch.

A familiar pang twisted up his insides. They wouldn't trust him if they knew everything. He shouldn't have lied to Grace. It was selfish and fucked up of him to keep hanging on to this… whatever they had. If Grace knew—

The speaker in the ceiling buzzed, interrupting his thought. The *Hail Mary's* automated voice cut in sporadically. ***"D—D— you—"*** The speaker fizzled out and Simon squinted up at it. He should probably wake up Grace.

The speaker hissed again and another voice came through the fuzz. It wasn't the *Hail Mary's* voice.

Do you believe in God? It was the woman, that voice from the *SM-8*.

Simon froze his hand hovering over Grace's shoulder.

Why wouldn't they want to save you? Knowledge and skill fade every year, same as the stars.

This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening.

You told me they blame you for Filament Station, Simon.

The static cascaded and Grace shifted at Simon's side. The voice was coming from all around was Grace's now. ***What happened to Filament Station?***

"Grace??"

Grace's fingers wrapped around Simon's arm. ***Filament Station is gone?*** Grace's voice whispered in the dark. ***Maybe you do deserve this.***

Simon scrambled away, and his shoulder slammed into the wall behind him. "I was trying to stop it!" His heart was hammering hard against his ribs. This couldn't be happening.

The lab lights flickered back on, triggered by Simon's movement.

Grace was propped half-up on his elbows, squinting blearily. "Simon? Tried to stop what? What's going on?"

Simon's mind was racing. He tried to keep the trembling out of his voice. "I never told you about Filament Station— How the fuck do you know about Filament?!"

Grace was blinking the sleep out of his eyes now, sitting up. "Woah woah, Simon—" He was coming closer.

"Stay the fuck away from me!" Simon shouted. "How do you know about Filament?"

"What—?"

He was interrupted by a mechanical groan and a sharp sickening snap from somewhere below them in the ship. Metal moaned and the floor under Simon vibrated.

Grace was distracted, looking past him towards the noise. This was his chance. Simon hauled himself up and bolted out into the corridor. He had to get away. He had to figure out what was happening. He must still be in the sub.

"Wait! Simon—!?"

Simon rounded the corner and halted at the edge of the landing. The xenonite seal above the airlock had cracked down the center. The blood that had been pooling between it and the hull was gushing out, splashing onto the floor.

Grace was in his ear again. What happened to Filament Station, Simon?

Simon jerked away, searching for him in the empty corridor.

“I didn’t blow up Filament Station! I didn’t get a choice! What is this?!”

Grace was nowhere.

Simon’s ears were ringing. He could feel suffocating heat. He was still there. “Did I just trade one fancy metal box to die in for another? Or am I still down there?! Is that what this is!?”

Grace rounded the corner from the lab. “Simon?! What’s happening?”

“Stop FUCKING WITH ME!!” Simon backed himself against the wall. The steady gurgle of blood below was getting louder.

I see you, Butcher.

Grace put his hands up helplessly. “I—I don’t understand— What happened?” he pleaded. He was pretending he didn’t know.

What happened to Filament Station?

Simon jerked his head, trying to shake Grace’s voice out of it. “No, no! YOU’RE LYING!”

“Simon, we have to take care of the contamination. I think it’s—”

Simon’s chest felt like it was caving in on itself. “I thought you were real.” His voice sounded pathetic, even to him. He was back in the sub, begging to come back up “I thought you were real.”

“Simon, I’m real! I’m real!” Grace was approaching slowly.

“No, you’re fucking not!” Simon could feel the cool wall against his back. This didn’t make any sense. He was supposed to be dead. He was supposed to be done. “Just let me go,” he begged.

Would you give everything, just to survive?

Simon’s shoulders were shaking against the wall. The blood below was cascading, splashing against the bottom of the ladder.

Give all, Simon.

Grace put his hand out tentatively, reaching out to touch Simon’s shoulder. He felt real, but he had felt real this whole time.

“I need you to be real,” Simon begged.

“I am! I am! Simon— I promise!”

Simon couldn’t make himself believe it, but if Grace *was* real, he had to warn him. “Grace, it’s *me*! It’s after *me*!” Simon wrapped his hand around Grace’s arm, holding on.

“I don’t understand. What is?”

You agreed.

Simon was trembling. “You have to put me back. I can’t do it myself.”

The stars outside the cupola window below were momentarily blotted out, as a shadow passed over them. ***It Was Meant For Us!!***

Grace was spluttering “Put you back? Where!? What are you—”

Simon grasped at Grace’s shirt. “I can’t do it. I want to live— I’m too fucking scared— You have to do it. You have to put me back.”

Grace pulled away. “I’m not going to—”

“Grace, please!”

“What? I can’t! We’re—”

Simon stopped listening. He had to get as far away from Grace as possible. It had followed Simon here. He had brought it with him. Simon pushed off the wall, not giving himself a chance to lose his nerve.

Simon the Butcher lost his nerve.

He flung himself down the ladder, and splashed into the ankle deep, crimson sick. “Simon!” Grace was clambering down after him.

The shadow passed over the stars again, all teeth and bone. If Simon got out there— if he got as far away from the ship as he could, maybe it would leave the *Hail Mary* alone.

Simon slammed the airlock controls and ducked through the waterfall of blood that cascaded over the airlock door.

Don’t come too soon.

The airlock doors were sliding closed behind him.

Not everybody gets to be saved! It’s worth it. It’s worth it!

Grace was shouting. “Simo—!”

The door slammed shut, cutting off the sound. Simon was alone in the quiet of the airlock. There was only the sound of blood dripping off of his clothes onto the white metal floor.

Simon whispered to himself in Eden Enochian. "*I give all.*"

He was under the Last Tree again, he was ready now. He had to be.

Chapter 29: Deja Vu

Chapter Summary: Grace follows Simon out the airlock and tries to bring him back inside.

Simon was already in the airlock.

Grace sprinted to the interface, his feet sloshing in the shallow pool of blood-moon contaminant that was gushing from overhead. He tried to override the airlock controls, but it was too late. He couldn't override commands that came from the inside console from the outside.

"Simon!!" Grace pounded his fist against the glass, his hand slipping against the slick film of blood that had collected on the hatch. "Simon!? Stop! What are you doing?!"

Simon was watching Grace's lips through the streaked glass, his hand hovering over the controls.

Grace begged. "Come back inside! Please, Simon! Simon—"

Simon lifted his hand from the controls and Grace felt a surge of relief. "Yes! Just come back! We can talk about this. We can figure this out. Whatever's happening we can—"

Simon wasn't watching his lips anymore, he wasn't listening. His brown eyes were soft and scared, locked on Grace's. He wasn't coming back inside.

"No! No! Stop! Simon! Stop!!" Grace scrabbled at the glass, swiping blood away so he could see inside. He pounded with his fists, pressing his hands against the door. He was begging the atoms to part so he could reach inside and pull Simon through. "Mary! Emergency Stop!"

The door didn't open, but the ship slowed to a halt. Gravity disappeared and Grace felt his legs float out from underneath him. "No no no no! Simon!!! Simon please! Please!!" He sobbed as Simon steadied himself against the airlock wall and turned back to the control panel.

"No! Stop! Simon!"

Simon didn't look back.

The decompression cycle started and Simon slumped sideways. He drifted limply against the outer airlock door his eyes partially open. Simon didn't have air anymore. Grace lost sight of his face as it disappeared behind heavy floating globules of blood.

"No!"

Grace scrambled into an EVA suit, skipping steps and rushing to shove himself inside. The inside of the suit was wet and sticky with the contaminant that had seeped into his clothes.

The outer airlock cycled and Grace could only watch through the red stained glass as Simon's limp outline drifted backwards, out into the star-dotted dark.

"Simon!" Grace hit the control panel, forcing it to cycle now that it didn't have any conflicting commands from the inside. The outer airlock slid closed and Grace squeezed the helmet on.

In the otherwise silent sphere of the helmet Grace could only hear his own breath and his heart pounding in his ears. Every breath meant that Simon was drifting farther away. He didn't have time.

Grace slammed his fist against the airlock, begging the inner door to open faster. It cycled, and Grace launched himself inside. He fumbled at the controls and closed the inner airlock while he clipped himself to a lead. As soon as it was closed he slammed the panel, forcing the outer airlock to open before it fully depressurized.

It slid open and the pressure difference launched Grace out with dizzying force. His lead unspooled behind him and he struggled to right himself and control his trajectory.

Simon had drifted so far in the time it took Grace to follow. Droplets of blood trailed behind him in undulating bubbles. His hair floated around his face. Ribbons of backlit red twisted among the black strands. He was completely exposed. His thin borrowed clothes billowed around his exposed arm and bare feet.

Grace surged forward, his heart already sinking. He was so far away. The lead wasn't going to be long enough. Grace could feel himself reaching the end of the tether. When that happened, he'd be jerked backwards. Grace would miss his chance, and his inertia would drag him back to the ship. He would have to watch Simon drift further out of reach. He wouldn't be able to stop it.

Grace unclipped his tether and held it tight in one hand. He reached as far as he could with the other towards Simon. Just a few more feet.

It wasn’t going to be enough.

He loosened his grip on the lead, curling his three longest fingers around it. Just a few more inches. Grace’s gloved hand brushed Simon’s shirt.
“Please!”

He closed his fingers around Simon’s collar just as the tether pulled taut, and snapped them back towards the ship. The force of it ripped the lead out of Grace’s fingers and they were careening untethered towards the *Hail Mary*. He wrapped himself around Simon’s limp body and fumbled for the lead.

They were spinning, and the stars were streaking past in dizzying stripes. His heart was pounding loud in his ears, and he could feel Simon’s dead weight slipping from his grip. He couldn't breath, his lungs wouldn't fill. He couldn't see where they were.

Tumbling, he stretched one arm out and somehow managed to tangle the tether around it. The carabiner at the end smacked into the side of Grace’s helmet and the comm fizzed. He wrestled them out of their spin and tightened his grip around Simon. He dragged them both towards the airlock, winding the lead one-handed around his elbow, until they reached the open hatch.

Once inside, Grace slammed the controls and forced it to cycle closed. As the outer airlock slid shut, Grace let himself look down at Simon’s face.

Frost had formed on his slightly open eyes, his lips were blue, and he was so still.

The inner airlock opened and Grace shoved off the wall with Simon in his arms. He floated as fast as he could to the med-suite.

He had done this before. He had done this before, and Simon had lived. But Simon had had a heartbeat then. Grace couldn’t ask Rocky if Simon had one now.

Chapter 30: Crew

Chapter Summary: Rocky wakes up alone on the Hail Mary.

Rocky woke up perturbed that neither of his humans were there watching, until he listened around the ship and realized something was terribly wrong. Gravity was gone. The *Hail Mary* wasn't moving. The xenonite seal above the airlock had ruptured and contamination was pouring in. Grace was one level down, pounding on the airlock.

Simon was inside.

Rocky moved as fast as he could, dragging himself upright and trying to shake off the slog of sleep. It took time for an Eridian to wake up. It wasn't something you could rush. Everything slowed down so much that once it was time to wake up, it took a while to regain internal circulation.

Grace was in the airlock now.

Then, in an instant, Rocky couldn't see him anymore.

Both of them were just gone. The ship was empty except for him.

"Grace!"

Rocky forced himself to tumble forward. His limbs were still partially numb from sleep, and he only managed to push off half as hard as he needed to. He floundered in the air.

"Simon!"

Grace had been wearing his suit. Rocky could tell one of the EVA suits was missing from the storage area by the airlock. But only one. Why wasn't Simon wearing one? Why had they gone out the airlock?

Rocky could feel the panic rising inside of him. It felt like his carapace was shrinking around him, threatening to crush inward.

His crew, his Eridian crew, when they had gotten sick— they had done things that didn't make sense. Grace had said it was radiation poisoning, but Rocky hadn't known that at the time. All he had known was his crew was sick.

They wouldn’t sleep after eating. Their carapaces started fissuring, and they stopped making sense. One of them, their name was *[musical notes]* had gotten the worst the fastest. They had wandered into Engineering and started pulling things apart. Rocky had needed to physically stop them. He had tried to calm them down until the others came to help. They were trying to tell Rocky something. But *[musical notes-name]* just kept repeating notes, like they were young, still learning how to sing properly. They had sounded so scared and so tired.

One by one they all got scared and tired, and Rocky had told each of them he’d watch them sleep. He had gathered them all up in the big room right above Engineering, and he’d watched. He watched until the ship felt empty. Until it felt empty even when he was nestled among their sleeping bodies. It took a long, long, long time for him to really believe they weren’t waking up, that the ship was going to stay empty.

Now the *Hail Mary* was empty.

Rocky pulled himself haphazardly down his tunnel towards the airlock.

Rocky couldn’t hear past the ship and into empty space on his own, but if he could get down to where he had left his light-to-sound translator and get back up to the cockpit, he’d be able to use the scanners. He could find Grace and Simon. There had to be a way to get them back. He could fix this.

Rocky was starting to regain feeling in his appendages, and picked up speed. He flung himself forward. He had to get downstairs. His biosphere bubble was in the med-suite still, from the last time they had watched *Star Trek.* His sound visualizer was inside.

He slammed hard into the ground on the med-suite level, and scrambled towards his biosphere. Thick droplets and puddles of contamination floated around the ship, collecting in undulating masses.

There was a hum above him and Rocky froze. The airlock was opening, he could see inside again. Both humans were back on the ship. Grace’s heart was beating hard, but Simon’s was silent.

Grace pushed off the wall, he was heading down this way.

“What happened. Question?!” Rocky whistled frantically. *“Grace!”*

Grace was still wearing his helmet, he probably wouldn’t be able to hear him.

Grace floated frantically into the med bay and scrambled to affix Simon’s

limp body under the med-bot’s dormant arms. They were both drenched in contamination. Droplets clung to them and scattered every time they moved. Grace waved his arms, and Armondo started to unfurl down. Not fast enough for Grace, though it seemed.

He ripped off his helmet and pressed his mouth to Simon’s, forcing air into his lungs. He pulled back and crossed his hands over Simon’s chest and pushed down rapidly, one shove after another. Rocky could see Simon’s heart being forced to work under Grace’s weight, but everything else inside him was still silent.

Armondo had come fully online and was reaching down, trying to get around Grace.

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare!" Grace shouted at Simon. His rhythmic pressing on his chest was disintegrating. He leaned back over, forcing more air into Simon’s lungs with his mouth. He pulled back and pounded on Simon’s chest with his fists. “DON’T YOU DARE!”

“Grace!”

Armondo was still trying to get to Simon, but it was unable to get around Grace. He was pounding on Simon’s chest, grabbing at his shirt. He was sobbing and yelling at him to wake up. “SAY SOMETHING!”

Rocky launched himself into his biosphere, using the inertia to barrel into Grace. The force of Rocky's collision knocked him back so Armondo could take over.

Grace hit the wall with a thud, and curled his hand around a rung of the ladder. He was sobbing, and his other hand clutched the collar of his suit.

Armondo’s arms were working fast, assessing and attaching monitors.

Rocky was left drifting in his ball overhead. *“Grace, what happen! Question!?”*

Rocky heard the air crackle, hot and sharp, as Armondo pressed some sort of electrified pad against Simon’s chest.

Grace wasn’t listening, his eyes were fixed on Simon. The monitors attached to his bed were displaying flat, quiet life signs. Grace was blank and trembling. His hand was clenched around the lip of the EVA suit under his chin so tight that Rocky could hear the rubber of his gloves squealing against the metal.

The med-bot pressed the electrified pad against Simon’s chest again.

The monitors were still silent.

Rocky tried to keep his octaves from dropping too low. He didn’t want Grace to hear funeral tones, not before they were sure. *“Grace…”*

Armondo administered one more shock, and the monitors sang to life with rapid beeping and urgent warnings. Simon's heartbeat and breaths returned, strong and frantic. He was alive.

As if connected to the same electrical pulse, Grace finally moved. He curled onto his side, and pressed his forehead to the ladder. He keened. He was making low, loud, wailing noises Rocky had never heard him make before. *"Grace. Simon alive. Statement."* Grace's noises only intensified.

Rocky listened as Grace sobbed and the monitors attached to Simon leveled out. Rocky drifted in his biosphere above them, unable to push off of anything. He couldn’t reach either of them.

“Still have full crew, Grace. Still have full crew.”

Chapter 31: Tell Me

Chapter Summary: Grace realizes he and Simon didn't know each other as well as he thought.

Grace sat numbly on the floor, next to the bunk Armondo had transferred Simon to. His pulse and O2 readouts still showed steady, but he hadn't woken up yet. Grace had wrapped Simon in their favorite quilt, and he could see his chest slowly rising and falling. He was still so pale.

Gravity was restored; Grace had gotten the *Hail Mary* going again. He and Rocky had also tried to install another band-aid xenonite seal over the contamination breach, but it was too late. There were thick puddles of blood-moon contamination all over the ship. They didn’t have anything that could kill it.

Grace reached up and curled Simon's limp fingers back around the medallion and the leather sheath. Grace had thought he might want them, if he— when he woke up.

When Grace had pulled the quilt from their pile upstairs, the empty medallion and the leather sheath had tumbled out of it. They must have been important to Simon, or he wouldn’t have stashed them away. But Grace didn’t know what they meant to him. He hadn't even realized Simon had taken them after Grace had originally shown him each of them. Grace knew almost nothing about Simon. How was that possible? After all this time, after they had… Grace had thought they were getting closer. He thought he was starting to understand.

Grace rested his cheek against the side of the bunk, watching the steady rise and fall of Simon’s chest.

Rocky had offered to watch Simon sleep for him, but Grace couldn’t leave.

He *should* be upstairs in the lab trying to figure out how to fix the contamination. He should be using the laptop beside him to do anything to try and solve this. But he just couldn’t.

The monitors beeped. ***Eye movement detected*** the automated voice said pleasantly.

Grace pulled himself up onto the edge of the bunk and gripped Simon’s hand. The medallion and the metal rivets on the sheath clinked together

under their fingers. Simon’s eyes opened blearily, and he took a sharp breath.

“Simon?” Grace asked tentatively.

Simon's eyes found Grace’s and for a moment they were soft and familiar, before they filled with caged panic again. “No. Nonono,” he croaked.

Simon was already trying to get up. Trying to leave again.

Simon was obviously in pain. He was obviously scared. He obviously thought he was trying to do the right thing, and Grace should have felt sympathy. But he didn’t. All he could feel was a hot flush of anger crawling up his throat.

“What’s *wrong* with you?” Grace’s voice was harsh, even to his own ears.

Simon was twisting away. “Grace, you have to—”

Grace was suddenly aware that he had two fistfuls of Simon’s shirt. “Listen to me!”

Simon was frozen, his hand wrapped around one of Grace’s wrists. His eyes were wide with shock.

The words tumbled out of Grace without getting permission from his brain. His hands trembled with rage, and the strain of holding up Simon’s weight. “You were just going to leave?! And what? *Die?*! Leave me alone?! After you —”

Simon was over his initial shock. He was trying to wrestle free of Grace’s grip. “Grace please–”

“No!! You don’t get to choose that for me!”

“You have to put me back! You have to—” Simon was begging. He was terrified.

“You want out so bad?” Grace shook Simon once, hard. “Tell me, *why*. I’m not just gonna launch you into space to die!”

Simon was still trying to wrestle away. Under normal circumstances he would have been able to, easily. But he was probably still half dead from his last merry-go-round in space.

Grace could hear himself yelling. “Nobody deserves that! Nobody!”

Simon was pushing weakly against Grace's chest, grunting with the strain. "You don't know what I deserve—"

Grace shoved away, pacing, unable to look at Simon anymore. "Fine, then tell me! What was that thing you were yelling about before? Filament? What's filament? Is *that* what's coming to get us?"

This wasn't the appropriate reaction. Grace knew that. But he was just so angry, and hurt, and tired.

Simon was breathing hard. "It was a station. It's gone."

"*Great.* Can't come kill us if it's gone so–"

"No— That's not—"

"Then what *is* it?!"

Simon had barely managed to push himself upright, his arm trembling with the effort. "I don't know! It caused the quiet rapture, it SAW me. I agreed to someth--"

"So you don't know what it is, but you think throwing yourself out the airlock will stop it." Grace said bluntly. His anger was fading, but the lump in his throat was threatening to choke him.

"Please—" Simon was trying to use the wall for leverage. "You have to fucking let me out. I keep trying to do the right thing, and it only gets everyone else killed— everyone but me! Let me do this!"

Grace flung his hands in the air. "You want to die so bad? Convince me! Convince me you're not worth saving, Simon."

Grace held Simon's gaze for a long moment. He was breathing fast and shallow. He looked caged, and pained, and just as tired as Grace felt.

Simon leaned his head back against the wall behind him. He must have realized he wouldn't make it up the ladder by himself.

"The nav chart," Simon said, finally. "Give me the laptop with the nav chart and Rocky's data"

Grace pulled the laptop off the ground and shoved it into Simon's lap. "Here."

Simon didn’t meet his eyes as he shakily opened it. His hand moved over the keys and Grace could see the light of the screen shutter as he flipped through the years of light and sound scans that the *Hail Mary* and Rocky had collected.

Simon turned the laptop around.

It was displaying a scan the *Hail Mary* had taken while Grace was in his coma. It was the WISE 0855-0714 system.

Grace folded his arms. “What am I looking at?”

Simon still wasn’t meeting his eyes. He tapped the screen and zoomed into something orbiting one of the planets. On the scan it just looked like a vague disk shape. It was at least fifty kilometers across.

“Filament Station.”

“If that is a station, it’s massive.” Grace said, not convinced.

“It was the biggest one left. It was where the COI was gathering people... to rebuild.”

Simon reached down to the laptop again. The display shuttered, switching to a visualization of Rocky's more recent Hubble Bubble scans.

The station disappeared, replaced with a small collection of debris.

Grace sucked in a sharp breath. “What happened to it?”

Simon met Grace’s eyes. His face was blank. “I did.”

He slid the laptop off his lap. “The Father sent me because I was the one he sent to hurt people, and I always did it. *I’m* The Butcher, Grace” Simon’s face had gone tight. “The Father sent us to sabotage their reactor. We blew it up using the sun-eater— the ‘astrophage’, and Filament wasn’t the only one.” Simon tried to push himself off the bunk again. “You can let me out now.”

“No.”

"No? The fuck are you—?” Simon was hovering on the edge of the bunk, barely holding himself up.

"How many people were on Filament Station?”

Simon was silent for a moment. Grace could see he was trying for that blank stoney look he had defaulted to when they'd first met. But he couldn't seem to hold it. He looked like Grace had an arm in his chest and was ripping stuff out.

"I don't know." Simon finally said. "At least sixty-two from the Consolidation, and twelve from Eden."

"There were 8 billion people on Earth when I left."

Simon scoffed. "Yeah well, there aren't that many of us out here—"

"No. Listen to me." Grace said. He had no patience left and Simon needed to hear him. "I'm going to tell you something. The whole truth about something. And then you're going to do the same. The whole truth. Agreed?"

Simon tried to push himself up again, and Grace pushed him back down onto the bunk. Grace was shaking with anger, and he was equally petrified by what he was about to say. What he was about to admit.

He had never even told Rocky this, and he would hear no matter where he was on the ship. They would both know after this.

"There were 8 billion people on Earth when I left," Grace said. "And it came down to two options. Either, I could get on this ship for a one-way-trip, die in space, and maybe everybody else would live. Or, I could not get on the ship, live a little longer, and everybody, all 8 billion of them would die."

Simon glowered "And here you are. You saved humanity. I'm not like you—"

"I RAN, Simon!" Grace didn't hold back the rage and the shame in his voice.

Simon's mouth shut. His eyes flicked up to Graces, his expression shocked and confused.

"I *didn't* get on the ship. I threw things. I screamed. I threatened to sabotage the *Hail Mary.* I ran away, *knowing* that it would mean I'd live a little bit longer, and then all 8 billion of us would die together. Because of me."

Grace was aware of his voice now. It was deadly calm, like Stratt's had been, but his heart was running in his chest. He forced the rest of the story out of his lips.

“The only reason I’m here is because someone braver and meaner than I am, caught me. And she didn’t give me a choice. If it *was* up to me— if it was down to me to make the choice— I’d have 8 billion lives worth of blood on my hands. That’s what I would have chosen.”

Grace relinquished Simon and put his hands in his pockets. “Now, tell me about your seventy-four.”

Chapter 32: Filament Station

Chapter Summary: Simon's last day in Eden.

⚠This chapter contains smut. See end notes for skip-to lines if you are uncomfortable with this content.

Chapter Notes: Get in losers we're going to Eden! (Y'all I have been chomping at the bit to get to this chapter since Simon told Rocky about his crew, his 'brothers.' in chapter 21! Have fun!)

Isaiah and Adam were bickering behind Simon. “Oh like you couldn’t have told me.” Adam said.

Simon could hear Isaiah snapping his fingers. “I did. You didn’t listen —” *“Reverence”* Simon barked over his shoulder in Eden Enochian. Telling them to ‘shut up’ in English would have done the trick too, but he wanted them to know they weren’t walking into a normal summons from The Father.

Adam and Isaiah fell silent behind him as they continued towards the center observatory.

After a few moments, Adam quickened his pace to fall into step just behind Simon. “What are we in for?” He asked quietly.

Simon didn’t know. Not for sure.

Isaiah had pulled closer too, walking just behind him on the other side. Simon just shook his head. They would all know soon enough.

Adam nodded, and jerked his head towards Isaiah. They both let Simon step further ahead. They would follow his lead.

Simon led them out of the corridors and into the domed observatory. The Father was waiting in his chair. The Last Tree's skeletal branches cast snaking shadows over him and the pallbearer who stood nearby. She had her head bowed, with a ceremonial lash in her hands. It was the one woven with the tender branches from the tree, from when it was still alive.

Simon heard Isaiah’s footsteps falter for a fraction of a second. He had noticed too.

The Father spread his hands as the three of them approached. In Eden Enochian he instructed them, *“Kneel”*

Simon carefully set his face and lowered himself to his knees. Adam and Isaiah took their places on either side. This wasn’t their first tithe to the tree, but now that they had seen the lash, they knew that this one would be different. It would be their last.

Isaiah was already lifting the hem of his shirt when The Father held out a hand to stop him. “My sons, a moment,” he said in his low rumbling voice. “I have received revelation. Good tidings, of great joy.” He leaned back in his chair, his bare gnarled feet settling on the tree’s roots.

The Father was old. Older than anyone else had been allowed to grow in Eden. Older than Simon would ever be. This was going to be his and his Brother’s final baptism. This one, Simon wouldn’t be coming back from.

Simon had guessed this was coming. The Father had already picked out another sword, another *butcher*. He likely had others waiting in the wings to replace Adam and Isaiah too. The Father collected boys, and they had all grown into men.

Over the last few months, Simon had watched The Father carefully select his replacement from Eden’s sparse children. Ezekiel. He had watched while The Father had carefully timed Ezekiel’s orphanhood by calling his parents to the baptismal flames. Simon had flown what was left of the burned out Consolidation cargo ship back to Eden with their bodies in tow.

Earlier that day Simon had stood outside The Father’s chambers, listening to an eerie mirror of his own conversation with him all those years ago.

> *“Tell me my son. Why were we given the sun-eater?” The Father had asked the boy.*
>
> *“To protect the Tree, so it can live again?”*

Simon had known it was coming, but he hadn’t let the last dregs of faith drip off him until he was listening to The Father’s low warm voice, muffled behind the door.

“I’ve prayed for someone strong enough to carry this burden. 'And I will scatter them to every wind, and draw out a sword after them. And he shall butcher the non-believers and return their bodies to the garden of Eden.'

The Tree waits for the last son of Earth to join the rest, Ezekiel. For their body to become the soil. Will you be my sword? My Butcher, Ezekiel?"

The Father's voice pulled Simon back to the present, he was under the Tree. "You will baptize Filament Station." The Father said. "The flame of the cherubim's sword will cleanse it, and you. It is time to go to the grove, my sons." The Father's gaze was lingering on Simon, waiting for assent.

Simon felt hollow. He had already known, but to hear it was different. He felt his mouth move of its own accord to accept. At least *it* was capable of obedience. *"Yes, Father"*

"Good," The Father crooned. He gestured the pallbearer forward. "Offer your last to the Tree, my son. Bind yourself to the grove."

Simon pulled the back of his shirt up around his neck and clasped his hands behind his head. The pallbearer dutifully paced around to stand behind him.

The Father recited from his chair, alternating between Eden Enochian and English. "We are but flesh. From the Earth we were drawn up. To the Earth we return. Our bodies become the soil."

The lash came down hard against Simon's back. He watched the shadow of the whip crack away, flinging droplets of blood into the dirt around the Tree's roots. *"I give all,"* he whispered.

The lash cracked down on Simon again, and he held himself steady. The Father had taught them to endure. All of his favorites learned that lesson.

Simon forced his mind to wander. He trailed the roots under his knees and the familiar shape of the observatory floor. He forced them to fade out of view. He wasn't here. He was nowhere.

The lash came down one more time, and the pallbearer wrung the whip out over the Last Tree's roots.

In Simon's youth, the tithes had been a private affair between The Father and his chosen. But now pallbearers had taken over the Father's role. He was too weak now to draw blood himself.

It was Isaiah's turn next. From his peripheries, Simon could see his face was stoney. The only proof that he registered the whip coming down on him was his eyes squeezing shut.

Simon felt a warm droplet of blood trail down his back from one of his own stripes. The crack of the lash was distant but he could feel himself falling back into his body. He couldn't stay checked out anymore. He watched as small drops Isaiah's blood flicked off the whip, mingling in the dirt with his own.

"I give all." He heard Isaiah intone as the pallbearer stepped away. Her footsteps paced to the other side of Simon, and brought the lash down on Adam's back.

Adam's eyes were fixed ahead. He was still, only sucking in sharp quiet breath with each lash. As the last one came down he whispered an almost inaudible. *"I give all."*

"Good," The Father praised from his chair.

The pallbearer coiled the whip reverently and knelt in front of The Father. He took it from her hands and dismissed her with a wave of his hand. Simon watched the hem of her grey-black clothes swish as she retreated behind them.

Her footsteps had faded into the corridor before The Father spoke again.

"Simon," he beckoned.

Simon relinquished his grip on the back of his neck and let his shirt fall back down. The fabric scraped at the raw gouges in his back. The movement would have forced a hiss of pain from him years ago, but this was not his first gift to the tree. It was his last.

He got to his feet and approached the seat under the Tree. The Father was cradling the lash in his lap. It left red smudges on his stiff knotted fingers, and on the thighs of his pants.

"Come. Beside me." The Father instructed, and Simon knelt again at his right. The Father's stained hand patted Simon's shoulder. He looked down with pride. "After your first baptism you had doubts, my son," he said. "Do you now?"

Simon forced himself to open his gritted teeth. "No, Father."

The Father's hand cupped under Simon's chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. He studied him, calculating. "I want you to go to the grove without doubt, Simon."

"Yes, Father."

The Father’s boney fingers patted the side of Simon’s face, leaving a smudge of cooling blood behind.

He dismissed Simon and the others with a wave of his hand. “Now go my sons, prepare yourselves. *Pray.*”

Simon got to his feet and started walking out of the observatory. Adam and Isaiah stood as he passed, following his lead. It was wordless now after all these years. Simon answered to the Father, and enforced his will. Adam and Isaiah in-turn had always answered to Simon.

He led them out into the corridor and the pallbearer scurried past them, followed by nine others. The other poor souls that had been chosen for Filament.

One of them accidentally met Simon’s eyes, and quickly looked down at her feet. She shied away, lifting her shoulders like she expected a blow. Her name was Mary. Her brother had faltered. Simon had carried his body to the tree, and butchered him over the roots.

Simon stepped back, letting the nine chosen sweep past him and his two shadows into the observatory. He knew all of their faces and they knew him.

They disappeared into the observatory and Simon lingered there, numb, until the snapping of the lash inside was too much. Adam and Isaiah said nothing. They knew not to question when Simon was leading.

Simon wiped the smudge of blood the Father had left on his face, and led them down the hall. The three of them would return to their quarters in The Father’s block, and they would pray. Then, Simon would drown himself in sleep. He was already a dead man. There was nothing else left to do.

The corridors passed in a dull blur, until he felt Adam reach out and nudge his shoulder. Simon glanced over, and Adam tilted his head backwards towards a maintenance hatch. Isaiah had already stopped, waiting beside it with his hands in his pockets.

Simon glanced between them, and Adam spread his hands silently. Simon knew what he was asking, what he was offering. A parting gift to each other.

They hadn’t done this in years. Not since they’d been younger men, and stupid enough to get caught. He guessed it didn’t matter now.

Simon glanced around to ensure they were alone in the corridor. This section was empty. Wordlessly, he brushed past Adam and pulled the

maintenance hatch open. Isaiah and Adam stooped obediently inside. Simon glanced around one more time, then followed, sealing it behind them.

Simon turned, and Isaiah's mouth was already pressed against his. His fingers were fumbling at Simon's belt.

"Wait, you idiot." Adam's familiar callused hands tugged them both forward, deeper into the maintenance shaft. Isaiah broke his kiss and shoved his hands into his pockets. They paced quickly and quietly until they reached a familiar section where several maintenance shafts met in a wide square.

In here, Simon wasn't in charge. Here, they weren't 'favored sons' of Eden. Here they didn't belong to The Father, they belonged to each other.

Adam lifted himself to sit on a chest-high ledge that lined the small alcove. Simon waited for instruction.

Isaiah's hand trailed down Simon's back, coaxing a pained grunt from Simon as his fingers brushed the barely scabbing slices. Isaiah had matching stripes, Simon could return the gesture later.

Adam had unbuttoned his pants and was lazily stroking himself from his elevated perch. "Take off your clothes, Simon," he ordered in a calm drawl.

Simon obeyed, reaching over his head to pull his shirt off. The fabric clung to his back, pulling painfully at the spots where his blood had started to dry. Isaiah was helpfully tugging down his pants. Simon pulled them the rest of the way off and stepped out of them. He was bare.

Simon could see Isaiah's eyes hungrily roving him. Adam was less transparent with his gaze, but he let out a soft breath as Simon watched him stroke himself.

"Come here," Adam said, taking his hand off his cock and leaning on the wall behind him. "Use your mouth."

Simon closed the distance between them. Adam's eyes were locked on his. This was a ritual. None of them had ever set the rules for it, but they knew them. Orders were challenges and Simon would meet them or he wouldn't, and if he wanted to challenge Adam he would.

Simon cupped his hands around Adam's thighs and pulled the pants slightly lower. He took Adam into his mouth and he was rewarded with a low moan. Adam slid his fingers into Simon's hair, pulling him further down around his cock. Simon's nose pressed against Adam's stomach, and he could feel his eyes water as his length touched the back of his throat.

This was a challenge he was happy to meet. Simon flicked his eyes upward and met Adam’s. He pulled his mouth up and let his tongue drag to the tip, before he let his eyes close, and he took the full length down his throat. Adam groaned appreciatively, and his grip tightened in Simon’s hair. Simon let himself fall into the rhythm, his mind going comfortably blank as Adam guided him up and down.

Simon felt Isaiah’s hands wrapped around his hip bones and tug so that Simon was bent over, ass presented while he continued to pleasure Adam. He felt Isaiah’s spit-slicked fingers delve into him, while Isaiah’s other hand wrapped around to jerk off Simon’s half hard dick.

Simon shuddered and Adam pressed himself deeper into Simon’s throat eliciting a stifled gag. Adam held his face still and rolled his hips to draw his cock in and out of Simon’s mouth. He whimpered around Adam’s cock. Simon’s eyes watered, and he surrendered entirely to the delicious agony of it.

“Good.” Adam praised still rolling his hips. He released his grip in Simon’s hair and stroked the locks back, his nails dragging softly against Simon’s scalp.

Simon felt Isaiah’s fingers withdraw, replaced by the tip of his dick sliding into him. Isaiah’s hands wrapped tight around Simon’s hips as he thrust slowly. Deeper and deeper each time.

Simon moaned and Adam pulled his head up by the hair. Adam's dick fell from Simon’s mouth and he ran a thumb through the spit that trailed from Simon's lips.

Isaiah was fucking him hard now, each thrust eliciting a louder involuntary groan from Simon.

Adam pushed his thumb into Simon’s mouth and pressed his tongue down. “Quiet.”

Simon couldn't clamp his mouth shut with Adam’s thumb on his tongue, and from Adam’s smug expression that was the point. He tried to quiet his groans to gasps.

“Still too loud,” Adam said, replacing his thumb with his four fingers and holding Simon’s jaw open.

Isaiah was pumping hard inside of him, his thighs slapping against Simon’s with increasing force. Simon was panting around Adam’s fingers. He

couldn’t keep quiet. Each jarring thrust was forcing a strangled moan from him.

Adam slid his fingers out of Simon’s mouth and down to Simon’s half-hard cock. “Here, let me help.” Adam pressed his mouth hard against Simon’s, kissing him deeply and stroking him off. Simon panted into Adam’s mouth, shuddering as Isaiah’s pace slowed and his hands slid up Simon’s chest.

Isaiah’s breaths were getting ragged; he was getting close. He was pressed into Simon’s back, and Simon could feel the fabric of Isaiah’s shirt catching on his jagged cuts.

One of Isaiah’s hands wrapped around Simon’s throat. His lips brushed against his ear. “Moan for me.”

Simon obliged as Adam’s tongue probed into his mouth. He moaned with each thrust, and Isaiah's hands clamped down tighter around his throat and around his hip. The sounds Isaiah was making were becoming more urgent. Simon felt him tense and spasm inside of him, before his grip loosened and he pulled out.

Simon’s legs were shaking as Adam broke their kiss. “On your hands and knees,” he said, and pushed down on Simon’s shoulder. Simon obeyed. He was drunk on the pleasure of it, on how small his world had become in this moment. How little control he needed to have.

Adam paced around him admiringly, and Isaiah came around to the front wiping his cock on his shirt.

“On your elbows.” Adam said. Simon arched his back and lowered himself prostrate. The cold hard metal of the maintenance shaft was far from comfortable, but Simon couldn’t be bothered to care. Isaiah was crouching down in front of him, settling in to watch.

Adam’s hand brushed over Simon’s ass and he felt him press close. His stiff cock, still wet from Simon’s spit, slid inside.

Adam started slow, his breaths low and heavy. His hands drifted around Simon’s back tracing around the lashes, and coming to rest around his waist. He pulled hard and thrust into him, earning a surprised cry. Adam’s rhythm was unhurried and forceful. He pulled in and out slowly, pressing his full length deep into Simon, filling him.

He wrapped one arm around Simon and pulled him upright. Simon was half kneeling, half sitting in Adam’s lap while he continued to thrust up into him. One of Adam’s arms was across his chest. The other had a handful of

Simon's ass as he guided him up and down. Isaiah leaned in from where he had been lounging on his heels, and kissed Simon with a deep appreciative inhale. He guided Simon’s hand to his own cock and murmured “Let me watch,” into his mouth.

Simon stroked himself, savoring the taste of Isaiah and the sensation of Adam, inside him and encircling him. Adam’s breaths were becoming more urgent, catching in his throat along with low moans. Simon was close, and he could feel Adam arching under him too. Isaiah pushed Simon’s hand away from his cock and took it into his own, stroking it and pressing his tongue into Simon’s mouth.

Adam groaned “Oh, *fuck*,” and spent inside of him. His grip tightened around Simon’s chest and Isaiah pushed Simon upright and wrapped his mouth around his dick.

Simon's world was so small, it was just their three bodies in this little alcove. It was just the three of them and the pleasure they gifted each other.

It only took a few strokes of Isaiah’s tongue and lips before Simon came, hard and shuddering into Isaiah's mouth.

They collapsed into each other, Simon sandwiched between them. He and Adam caught their breath, still twitching. Isaiah hummed contently and wiped his mouth. None of them spoke. Staying pressed against each other for as long as they could, before they’d have to break the spell

Simon’s brain slowly came back online, and he could feel the familiar dread creeping back in. This would be the last time. Their time was finally up.

Adam’s face was pressed against Simon’s back and he could feel Adam's stubble in between the crisscross of deep stinging cuts. Isaiah’s hands had wrapped around Simon’s shoulders.

All three of them were quiet, their breaths shallow, as if they were afraid just breathing too loudly would break their sanctuary.

It was a long time before Simon finally did break it. It was time to go back to reality.

Simon shifted and tugged free of Isaiah’s arms. “Get my clothes.”

Isaiah nodded, and broke away to collect them from where they had been discarded.

They had returned to their usual hierarchy, and Simon had responsibilities again.

Adam pulled away and sniffed. “Staggered exit?” He asked, not looking up as he re-dressed himself.

Simon took his clothes from Isaiah and dressed slowly. Adam waited for his answer.

“Yes, but not yet.” Simon finally said, tugging his shirt down. He met both Isaiah’s and Adam’s eyes in turn. “I’ve got a different plan for Filament.”

Under the skeletal branches of the Last Tree, The Father offered his eulogy. His sermon for the twelve faithful who were called to baptize themselves in flames and cleanse Filament Station.

Simon scanned the small crowd, everyone who was left of Eden had been gathered. Ezekiel was standing near The Father’s feet, his bright eyes wide and attentive.

“Radiant light!” The Father no longer stood for these gatherings. Instead, he sat in an ornate scavenged chair at the base of the tree. He was too weak to stand long enough to send them to their deaths.

“The sun eater. The fire of the cherubim's sword, given to us to guard the tree. Radiant heat in the cold and dark. An end that becomes new life.”

Simon let the words wash over him. They didn’t mean anything anymore.

“Our brothers and sisters go forth, and they will return. We will bring their bodies home, and they will live again when the last children of Eden return to the fount of trees.”

The pallbearers knelt in front of the tree whispering prayers into its roots. "The Last Tree will live again. The Last Tree will live again. The Last Tree will live again…”

The Father continued his well-rehearsed sermon. “They baptize themselves in fire and smite the down Consolidation for their greed, their pride. We will bring them all home!”

Simon let his fingers glide up and down the worn surface of his mother's last gift. The knife in its dark leather sheath, and the small vial of sun-eater. He let her words, and his promise to her surface in his mind.

'*Live first.'* Her voice had faded in his memory, leaving only the words behind. *'Promise me. Don't come too soon.'*

Simon had done his best. He had lived as long as he had been allowed. Longer even. But he didn't expect to meet her in the grove.

The Father was beckoning the gathered crowd towards the tree, inviting them to touch the roots. It was time for Simon and the other eleven chosen to board the small stolen Consolidation craft. Simon began to turn, to follow the others, but The Father's voice called him back. He had earned a goodbye.

The Father waved him to kneel at his feet, and Simon obeyed. He kept his eyes on the ground and The Father's gnarled toes. They matched with the dead roots.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the boy, Ezekiel, watching. The Father's hands found Simon's shoulders, cold and frail. "I will see you in the Fount of trees," he said. "It won't be long now. *You've done well, good and faithful son."*

Simon kept his head bowed, but lifted his eyes to meet The Father's gaze. He steeled himself and he held it. It was something the boy he had been, had never been able to do. He wanted The Father to know that he could. He wanted The Father to know that he *knew* what he was.

I see you. Simon thought, letting the burning inside of him pour out through the pinholes of his eyes.

He watched something in The Father's face recoil.

Satisfied, Simon stood from where he had been told to kneel. He towered over the fragile man in the chair, and he let himself savor the small victory before he turned and walked to his fate. Isaiah and Adam trailed behind him, giving their final respects to The Father in turn.

It was a short ride to Filament Station, the stolen Consolidation ship was fast even in its partially de-constructed state. He and his eleven companions had twenty-four minutes to consider their fate. Which means Simon had twenty-four minutes to change it.

Simon set the autopilot and double-checked their trajectory. Until they reached Filament, Simon's plan was identical to The Father's. He glanced around. The three favored sons, Adam and Isaiah and himself, were the ones The Father had entrusted with the sun-eater. It would be up to the three of them to breach the reactor and detonate the sun-eater inside.

He met both of their eyes, and stood silently. Simon walked to the back of the ship and after several minutes, Isaiah followed, then Adam. They had a plan to stop this, they had a plan to live.

Isaiah rolled the small vial of sun-eater between his fingers. His voice was low and almost inaudible. "No time for doubts," he whispered. Adam looked to Simon. "Plan?" Simon glanced down the corridor to the other nine sacrifices. Their presence complicated this.

"We reach Filament Station, and we surrender." Simon nodded towards the others "If any of them… we do what we have to."

Adam looked between Simon and Isaiah. "Then that's that."

Adam pushed past them back down the corridor, and returned to his seat. After enough time had passed not to arouse suspicion, Simon nodded for Isaiah to do the same.

Isaiah was still rolling the vial between his fingers. "What if you're wrong?"

A robotic voice blared over the ship's speakers. Some sort of automated system in the Consolidation ship had connected to Filament Station's system.

Connecting.
Running Vessel Identification.
Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait.
Insufficient privileges. Unrecognized Vessel.
Leave the area immediately or surrender yourself to council authority.

"Time to go." Simon strode to the front of the ship, and took over the controls from the autopilot system. He was the default pilot on this mission. Him guiding the ship wouldn't arouse any suspicion until he took over the comm and started the negotiation with the Consolidation.

He could see Filament Station through the front view port. It was massive, and beautiful. He could see why this was where the Consolidation was gathering all the last remaining souls. If they really could survive the Quiet Rapture, it would be here.

The comm was starting to crackle, they were within range. Simon reached out for the comm. He would have to trust his Brothers to protect him once he started talking.

His fingers had just brushed against the transmission switch when something cracked against his skull and sent him reeling out of the pilot's seat. His vision flashed as he hit the ground and tried to push himself up. He was kicked back down.

Adam stood over him with a thick metal pipe. His eyes were hard and determined. "Isaiah, take over controls."

Isaiah brushed past him, and Simon tried to push himself up. "What are you —?!" he was rewarded with a sharp kick to his diaphragm, and a hand at his throat.

Adam's hard eyes were level with his own. "The Father told us you were faltering. I should have believed him."

Simon could feel blood trickling through his hair and down the back of his neck. "Adam please. We—"

Adam's hand tightened around his throat and Simon tried to pull it off, but his fingers only fumbled around Adam's wrist. His head was pounding from the blow, and he couldn't breathe. This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

Isaiah called over his shoulder. "Contact in 30 seconds."

"I wanted you to come to the fount of trees with us. I wanted to give you a chance to change your mind."

Simon's mind reeled. Adam and Isaiah had agreed. The three of them had wanted to live. They had wanted the people on Filament Station to live. Simon felt like his eyes were going to burst. He forced the last of the air in his lungs into a few words "I didn't-- want- them-- to die."

Adam's grip tightened. "Excuse me? The fuck did you just say?! When did you grow a conscience, Simon?"

Adam threw him against the steel wall, and before Simon could push himself up Adam's boot came down hard across his jaw.

Simon’s ears were ringing. He was back in the shadow of the Last Tree. The Father was lashing him, teaching him to endure. The Father’s low voice rumbled in his ears *“We are but flesh!”*

Adam’s boot came down again, bringing him back to this moment. “You got the highest body count out here, killer!” Adam was hauling Simon upright by his collar. “Not one of us has more blood on their hands than you!”

Simon’s hands scrabbled off of Adam’s arms. “PLEASE! I—”

Adam’s hand wrapped around his throat again. Simon came to his senses a second later with his nose crushed against the floor. Simon could hear rapid footsteps leaving the ship and shouting in the distance. He was too late. They were already docked.

Adam’s lips brushed against Simon’s skin as he growled into his ear. “Simon the Butcher lost his nerve. You're gonna have to kill your own Brothers to stop this...”

Simon felt the pressure of Adam’s knee disappear from his back, and heard his sprinting footsteps echo down the corridor.

“No. No!!!”

Simon hauled himself to his feet and forced himself to follow. He staggered, his ears were ringing, and the blaring alarms and lights only added to the spots forming in his vision.

Adam was only a few paces in front of him. He needed to stop him before he reached a reactor, and he needed to find Isaiah.

His hand went automatically to his sheath, empty. Adam must have taken it before he ran. Simon threw himself at Adam’s back and wrestled him to the ground. Adam slashed up at him with the knife, but Simon was well past feeling any pain as it shredded his arms and chest.

Simon twisted his fingers into Adam’s hair and slammed his head down against the grated metal floor. There was an animal inside of Simon making horrible noises with each blow. A strangled wailing sound echoed the blaring alarm. Adam had stopped moving, but Simon couldn’t stop. The brown hair in his fingers was becoming slick and tangled. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.

Footsteps ahead pulled him from his stupor and Simon’s head snapped up. It was Isaiah, he was doubling back. His hands were empty.

Isaiah skittered to a stop twenty paces away. “What did you do!?” He screamed.

Simon relinquished his grip on Adam’s hair and staggered to his feet. “Where’s your sun-eater?!” He demanded.

“I did what I was supposed to!”

Simon’s head was pounding. “We had a plan!"

Isaiah stood his ground. “You can still come to the grove, Simon! Use your sun-eater! We can go together!”

Simon couldn’t make his legs work, he was frozen. He needed to get to the reactor and undo what Isaiah had done, but it was too late.

Isaiah was shaking, his face splitting between grief and rage. “Don’t just stand there! Do something!!”

In an instant, the corridor was swallowed in flame. Simon was flung backwards momentarily, before the depressurization sucked him and everything else forward towards open space. The corridor was exploding towards him in one instant, and pulling away towards a vacuum in the next.

The Father’s voice mocked him. *‘Radiant Light. Radiant heat in the cold and dark.’*

He barely had time to register that he and the flames were being sucked out into the star-less void, before an emergency barrier slammed down and Simon cracked into a bulkhead. His ears were ringing and he tasted blood. Isaiah’s body was crumpled in front of him, glassy empty eyes staring into his. The flashing emergency lights reflected off their surface in red pin-pricks.

Chapter End Notes: To skip smut, stop reading at: Simon turned, and Isaiah’s mouth was already pressed against his.” and skip to: "They collapsed into each other, Simon sandwiched between them."

Chapter 33: Borrowed Time

Chapter Summary: Grace tries to make sense of what Simon has told him. And they are forced to take action when they hear footsteps on the Hail Mary's hull.

“It’s not just Filament,” Simon said. His whole body sagged, and he looked like he was waiting for Grace to hit him. “I did everything The Father asked. Everything. I can’t even give you a number, Grace.”

“You didn’t do what he asked at Filament.”

Simon shook his head, unable to meet Grace’s eyes. “Didn’t fucking matter.”

Grace sat down next to Simon on the bunk. It was so much worse than Grace had imagined, but he had calmed down now. He wanted to choose his words carefully. “This… isn’t about punishment…The past,” he said. “If it was, I'd be stepping out the airlock with you. I need your help to get Rocky home and save Erid’s star. I need your help. That’s all.”

They were both quiet for a long moment. Grace didn’t know what to say. All of his emotions were all jumbled together. He was so tired, and raw, and while he was relieved that Simon was alive, he could see the contamination spreading down the walls and pooling around the ladder. It might not matter in the end. Maybe Grace had re-suicided this mission after all.

Maybe it was just fate finally catching up, after living on borrowed time.

“I didn’t want to.” Simon’s voice was barely more than a whisper. Grace glanced sideways over at him, he could see Simon’s adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard. “In the airlock. I didn’t want to leave…I didn’t want to die. I thought I was just finally doing what I was supposed to.” He took a sharp shaky breath. “It was always what I was supposed to do. I thought…” His hand trailed over the medallion and the sheath beside him.

Grace felt his throat tighten. He knew what it was like to be offered a chance to sacrifice it all, to be expected to do it. To have all your choices narrowed down to one, and the awful hollow feeling that you try to pass off as peace when all you want to do is scream, and run, and live.

“It was what I was supposed to do too.” Grace said, and risked a full look over at Simon. He was leaning against the wall for support, his hand gripping the bedding, white knuckled.

“If I had just died in the sub. If I had just gotten the black box to Ava… none of this would have fucking happened." Simon said. "You and Rocky would be safe. I’m sorry.”

That was so stupid. This was all so monumentally stupid. Why in the world would Simon dying, or him dying, do any good?

Whose idea was it to just decide the *Hail Mary* was a suicide mission and move on? Whose idea was it to decide that Simon’s trip in the *SM-13* had to be one-way?

Sure, in the *Hail Mary’s* case, coming out here was dangerous. Sure, Stratt couldn’t guarantee the *Hail Mary* a return trip. But she couldn’t guarantee it *wasn’t* possible. And whoever told Simon that he was supposed to die— enough times that he believed it— was probably full of it too.

They were both still here. They were both still alive, which meant the odds were never zero.

“Fuck that.” Grace blurted. He immediately snapped his mouth shut again. He was not the cursing type. He opened it again. “No— You know what? No, fuck that— screw that.” Still felt wrong, but Grace was on to something.

Simon looked over at him, alarmed.

“We’re not supposed to do anything. And if we are, it’s sure as heck not dying.” Grace realized he was shaking. “*No!* We both did what we were *actually* supposed to do. I got the information Earth needed. You got the black box. That’s what they actually needed.”

The more Grace talked the more he was convinced he was right. His sleep deprived brain was done bending over backwards trying to make sense of a justification that didn’t make any sense.

“Dying wasn’t actually a prerequisite for what either of us were asked to do.” Grace said. “And we did what they asked, and we lived— and FUCK them for not even considering we might be smart enough to figure out how do our jobs *and* survive.”

Simon’s eyes were wide. Grace was yelling again, but he couldn’t stop. He was fuming. His brain suddenly spinning with all the possible solutions that he, and Stratt, and the *Hail Mary* team had never bothered with, because they had already decided it would be a one way trip.

“And screw them for assuming it wasn’t worth it to us. Screw them for expecting us not to *try*!”

Grace stood up. He was going to get to the bottom of this contamination problem. They *weren’t* doomed. They *weren’t* living on borrowed time. They just had one more problem to solve.

Simon shook his head slowly. “I— Grace, it’s not the same. I didn’t just—”

“Shut up. Simon, I don’t care.”

Simon flinched back. But Grace really meant it.

“Sounds like you did some messed up stuff.” Grace said. “Sounds like you didn’t have a choice. I don’t really care. Neither of us got a frickin' choice!” Grace scooped up the laptop from beside Simon. He leaned over, forcing Simon to meet his eyes. “When you first got here you asked me what I wanted. Ask me again.”

Simon paused, his expression open and baffled. “What… do you want?”

Grace held Simon’s gaze and counted on his fingers. “I want to live. I want you to live. I want to get Rocky home. And I want to save the frickin’ stars” Grace held out his hand like he was holding a microphone. “What do you want Simon?”

Simon blinked. “Uhh… that all— That sounds good.”

“Great.” Grace settled next to Simon on the bunk, and reopened his research tabs. “Then we’ve got work to do.”

“GRACE!”

Simon was shaking him awake. Grace must have fallen asleep. He was slumped on the bunk with the laptop in his hands.

Simon’s voice was urgent and his eyes were wide with panic. “Grace. The ship's reactor— the fuel, can it be accessed from the outside?!”

“What?”

Simon shook him hard. “Grace, can it?!”

“Ye—yes! Why—?”

Simon was hauling himself off of the bunk, unsteady on his feet. “They’re going to try and detonate the ship.”

“What?! Who?”

Simon pointed up. “*Eden*. Listen!” He hissed.

Grace didn’t hear anything at first. How could Simon hear something he couldn’t?

“They’re on the hull!” Simon insisted.

Then all at once Grace could hear it. Low thumping on the outside, like footsteps. Grace’s heart leapt into his throat. “How do you know?”

Simon’s expression was hard, but Grace could see the panic in his eyes. “Because I’ve done it.” Simon let go of the edge of the bunk. He was moving fast towards the ladder.

“Wait—” Grace started, but Simon only made it to the doorway before his legs started to buckle. He leaned hard against the wall. “Grace,” Simon panted. “You have to get to the cockpit. We have to shake them off. I can’t get up there fast enough.”

This didn’t make any sense. From what Simon had told Grace, Eden didn’t have ships fast enough to keep up with the *Hail Mary.* And they had no way of knowing where they were. Why would they be here?

A loud thunk from the hull pulled Grace from his thoughts. “*Please,*” Simon begged.

Grace nodded, his brain grinding to a start. He felt dizzy and his heart was beating so hard he could feel it in his neck.

“What do I do?” He asked, hauling himself up the ladder.

Simon called after him. “Spin! Start and stop! Do whatever you can to build speed and throw them off with it!”

Grace pulled himself up onto the airlock level, and sprinted to the next ladder. The stars outside of the airlock glittered. He couldn't see any ships. They must be on the other side, or Eden left their ship behind once they boarded.

A hand slammed against the outer airlock hatch and Grace stumbled back with a gasp.

Pale hair drifted into view in a weightless cascade. The skeletally thin hand scrabbled at the glass pane, pulling someone up with it.

"No," Grace whispered. His voice lost was over the sound of his blood rushing in his ears.

The hand reached higher to grip the outer edge of the airlock. The sleeve of a yellow crew uniform stretched into view. "No, no no nono!"

Grace hadn't realized he was backing away until his heel dipped over the edge of the landing. He wavered, nearly toppling down the 20-feet drop into the med-suit.

Simon was half way up the ladder, his face shining with sweat. He had tucked a pipe-wrench under what was remained of his left arm. "What is it!?"

Grace stumbled forward, regaining his balance. His panic was mounting. "It's my—" The airlock window was empty. It was just stars. There was no one there. "...crew."

Below, Simon slipped down a rung. Grace heard something slam hard against the metal bars. Simon swore in a language Grace didn't understand, then shouted up to Grace "I can't hear you. You have to go!!!"

Grace was breathing hard. He paced quickly around the airlock, hugging the far wall of the corridor. There was nothing there. Where had she gone? It had to have been Ilyukhina's hand he saw. Her long hair. Her crew uniform.

There was another thunking footstep on hull above, and Grace forced himself to turn his back on the airlock. He scrambled up the ladder. His hands were slick with contaminants now, almost every surface had a thick film of blood on it. The bottoms of his shoes were coated too, and he could feel his feet trying to slip out from underneath him on the ladder rungs.

He had to get to the cockpit. Grace was mentally mapping the controls he'd need to hit once he got there. Erratic maneuvers were his specialty, he just needed to make sure he didn't accidentally kill them all.

Grace pulled himself up onto lab level and sprinted to the last ladder. He was almost to the cockpit. The footsteps on the hull were getting louder. There must be a dozen of them sprinting up and down the hull.

Grace finally reached the top of the ladder and could peer over the lip into the cockpit. A quarantine door had come down. He couldn't get in. Grace pulled himself up. "Mary, dismiss—" Grace froze. There was someone in the pilot's seat.

The figure inside turned slowly. Sunken eyes glittered in the constellation of LED control lights. His yellow crew uniform was in tatters, soaked in contamination. Soaked in blood. The speaker in the ceiling above Grace crackled to life. The *Hail Mary's* pilot didn't speak, but his voice drifted out of the ship.

Time to be brave. Yáo's voice curdled in Grace's ears.

"No, nonono." Grace whimpered as another figure stepped out from the shadows.

Stratt's cold eyes peered out at him from behind the quarantine door. Her voice crackled out from the speaker. ***You're a coward, Dr. Grace. I believed in you, but here you are. Still running.***

Inside the cockpit, Stratt put a hand on the back of Yáo's chair. Her eyes were burning into Grace. They were seething like they had been before, when he had tried to escape her office.

You had to die for the mission to succeed. You knew that. Her voice was deadly calm. She tapped Yáo. Take us into the atmosphere.

Grace watched Yáo reach for the controls. "Stop! Stop No!!" Grace's foot slipped and he felt his stomach drop out from under him.

Yào was going to steer the *Hail Mary* into one of the nearby planets. They were going to burn up. They were going to die. Grace fumbled for the ladder and only barely managed to catch himself by grabbing the ledge. He pulled himself back up and threw himself at the quarantine door. "Stop! Please!!!"

The cockpit was empty. Grace's heart was racing. Where had they gone?

Rocky’s voice drifted through the roaring in Grace’s ears. It was a wilting pained cry. The notes were halting and unintelligible.

Where was Rocky?

Chapter End Notes: I promise I'll put away the blender soon.

Chapter 34: Ezekiel

Chapter Summary: Simon is confronted by the agreements he's made, and the replacement he left behind.

Simon struggled up the ladder. He was nearly up to the airlock, but he was blinking spots out of his vision. He pulled the pipe wrench out from under what was left of his severed arm, and tossed it clattering up to the level above. He hauled himself up after it, and floundered over the ledge. There was a growing pressure in his head. He had smashed his face into the ladder when he slipped earlier. The blood that had smeared onto his cheek felt like it was burning through, but he needed to get to the airlock. He needed to keep Eden out. He had to trust Grace to shake them off of the hull.

Simon got himself to his feet and scooped up the wrench. He had to lean heavily on the curved wall for support.

He heard a whimper, and froze.

There was a boy crouching on the floor in front of the airlock, trembling. He was surrounded by three sprawled bodies in Eden clothing. It was the kid.

“Ezekiel?” Simon breathed.

This child had been his replacement. Simon had watched The Father quietly choose him, and now he was here, doing what Simon would have been sent to do.

Ezekiel's hands were wrapped around a vial of sun-eater and a knife. It was almost as long as his arm. He was covered in blood up to his elbows. It was spilled down his front. Simon could see spatters of it dripping off the kid’s chin.

Ezekiel was locked in place, his eyes wide and trained on Simon.

“Hey kid. It’s Ezekiel, right? I—*AGh*!” The side of Simon’s face was suddenly searing. Heat and pain dribbled down his jaw. Simon dropped the wrench he was holding and reached up to his cheek. The kid was watching him wide-eyed.

Smooth slick prongs had sprouted on the side of Simon’s face. Teeth, sharp and thin like the eel’s, pushed out of his cheekbone and jaw. Whatever

agreement he had made was coming due. If he had known what he had agreed to— If he had known what he would be asked to give— He had wanted to live so badly, but not like this. Not as a monster.

Simon put his hand out. “Ezekiel. I’m— I’m not going to hurt you. Can you tell me if there’s anyone else here?”

The kid hoisted the knife over his head. He was screaming. and cursing in Eden Enochian, in English, it seemed like he was trying every language he knew. **“Stay away from me!”**

Simon could see the kid coiling, prepping to leap up.

“Hold on—Ezekiel please—” Simon tried to force his voice into something soothing. He covered the side of his face again with his hand. He couldn’t scare this kid. “Ezekiel. You want to live.” Simon tapped his chest, just over his heart. “I want that too, for both of us.” He added *I speak true* in Eden Enochian, hoping the language would give his words weight.

The kid’s knife-hand was slowly lowering, but his eyes were still wild. Simon could see his chest rising and falling with fast shallow breaths.

"Simon!” Grace’s footsteps were pounding down the corridor towards them.

“Grace, wait!”

Simon only took his eyes off the kid for an instant. He heard Ezekiel scream and his footfalls hit the floor hard and fast. The kid was coming at him. Simon had time, he could grab the wrench to bat the kid aside. He could get the knife out of his hand while he was dazed. But he didn’t.

Simon let the kid come to him. Simon couldn’t hurt him. He’d take whatever blows the kid got in with the knife, and he’d try and get a hold of him. Simon was on borrowed time, Ezekiel wasn’t. The kid had the knife as high as he could, it would come down around chest height on Simon. He braced for impact; he was wide open for this. He stretched his arm out ready to catch the kid.

“Ezekiel!”

The child crashed into him, but he was like smoke. Simon’s hand closed around empty air and he stumbled forward when the anticipated blow never came.

Simon spun around. Ezekiel was gone. The bodies he had been crouched beside were gone. This didn’t make any sense.

He heard Grace clamber down the ladder behind him.

Simon covered the side of his face again. “Grace, stay back!”

“Simon!” Grace shouted. “It’s Rocky, I need your help!”

Simon could hear it now. A low warbling upstairs. Rocky was hurt somewhere near the lab.

Simon backed up. “This doesn’t make sense.” Simon pawed at his cheek, it was his again. There was just his stubble and the slight indents of scars. His face was slick with sweat and contamination but there were no teeth.

“Simon! Please!” Grace had his hands around Simon’s shoulders now, shaking him. “I can’t get into the lab! I need you!!”

Simon swept his eyes around the corridor one more time. There was nothing. It was empty aside from the blood seeping down the walls. “Let’s go.”

Grace pulled him along and Simon struggled up the ladder after him. Rocky’s warbling was getting louder. It wasn’t words. It just sounded like pain and panic.

“Rocky!” Grace shouted. “We’re coming! Hold on!”

Grace helped Simon up the ladder as best he could before he disappeared over the lip onto the lab level. Simon hauled himself up as fast as he could, trying to keep up. He was drenched in sweat and trembling. Grace reached down and pulled him onto the landing.

By the time Simon managed to get back to his feet, Grace was banging on a quarantine door over the lab's doorway. The inside was pitch-dark and the only sound coming from inside was Rocky haunting melody.

Simon stumbled next to Grace and tried to get his fingers under the lip of the emergency door. He heaved, and Grace did the same, both their shoulders pressed against the plexiglass.

“Rocky!” Simon shouted***.***

Laboratory barrier disengaging. Mary’s crisp voice announced.

That shouldn’t have worked.

Grace was already slipping under the half-raised barrier. “Grace wait!” Simon called, but Grace was already inside.

Rockies haunted, pained singing grew louder *“Simon! Help!”*

“Fuck me.” This was a trap. It had to be. But Simon couldn’t leave Rocky to whatever Eden would do to him. Simon ducked under the quarantine wall, into the pitch-dark lab.

Rocky’s cries cut off suddenly, and the quarantine wall slammed down behind him.

“Rocky!” Grace cried “Rocky, we can’t see! Where are you!?”

Simon strained to hear anything, and reached out for Grace in the dark. “Grace.” He tried to keep his voice as low and quiet as he could. “Grace, this is a trap.”

“What—?”

Would you do anything to survive?

Simon spun around. There were two glinting eyes in the dark. Simon couldn’t see him but he’d recognize his voice anywhere. His heart was in his throat, threatening to choke him. He felt around in the dark, and his hand found purchase on Grace’s sweater. “Grace get behind me.”

We agreed, Simon. I held you in my keeping. My butcher. My sword.

The eyes were burning, radiant pin holes of light. They seared into him.

“Simon, what is it?” Grace's voice was tight and sharp.

An offer, my son. Give them to us. How many bodies have you crawled over to live? What’s two more?

Simon pushed grace further behind him. “FUCK OFF!”

Give all.

“Simon, what do you see?!”

Accept. Agree, my son.

“NO! Stay the fuck away from them!”

Grace squeezed his hand. “Simon—?!”

“Grace, stay behind me!”

The lights started to flicker on, and the burning eyes faded. There was just a rack of equipment with a constellation of blinking LED lights.

Willowy branches twisted around the room and through the rack. Green leaves shuddered slightly as they grew in all directions.

Grace gasped behind him, and Simon spun around. Rocky was standing in his xenonite biosphere. He had the air of an annoyed parent. He didn’t have hands or hips, but if he did, he would have his hands on his hips.

“Humans done acting freak out. Question?”

Chapter 35: Rocky Save Leaky Space Blobs

Chapter Summary: Rocky is an engineer not a scientist. But he as to fix this. He has to save his leaky human friends!

Approximately 6 Hours Earlier

Rocky's humans were broken. They were freaking out, galloping in and out of airlocks, and screaming about who knows what. Nothing they were saying made any sense, and now that he had watched them for a bit, he was certain this wasn't the 'mating-madness' he had observed earlier. Rocky had to assume it had something to do with the contamination. It was replicating at an alarming rate and he was running out of time. He could have really used the humans' help but that didn't seem likely right now.

Rocky was keeping a careful eye on their movements, and had taken care to lock them out of all of the essential systems. (*Yay, yay, yay for the human thinking machine "Hacking 101"*)

Rocky had locked himself in the lab, and he had made certain the humans couldn't access the cockpit, the fuel tanks, or throw themselves out the airlock... again.

Earlier, both the humans had been yelling at each other, and from what Rocky overheard, Grace had apparently been forced onto the *Hail Mary*. He hadn't volunteered. That combined with what Rocky had learned about Simon's humans… Rocky was really glad neither of them were going back to Earth. Other than Grace and Simon, humans seemed really mean.

Rocky was obviously mad, mad, mad that Grace had lied to him (again), and he definitely had questions about Simon's humans, but there were bigger problems to deal with.

He wished for the 39,306th time that his crew had survived. He could do this with their help. They could thrum and they would figure it out together. It would be so much faster with them than he could on his own. But Rocky was alone, or at least he would be if he didn't fix his leaky space blobs soon.

Downstairs Simon was shaking Grace awake, his voice was urgent. "Grace. The ship's reactor, the fuel, can it be accessed from the outside?!"

"Ye—yes! Why—?"

Simon was trying to get off the bunk. “They’re going to try and detonate the ship.”

Rocky paused. *WHO???* He rotated around. The humans were blabbering about sounds coming from the hull, but there was nothing. They were acting freak out again.

An automated voice pulled Rocky’s attention away from the humans. Confirmed. Switching on. Welcome, Captain Ava. Rover 13 connected Running diagnostics. Wait. Wait. Wait.

Rocky tuned out the conversation happening downstairs. The salvaged monitor they had slapped to the black box had come to life. Hacking 101 worked!

Oxygen- fail. Fuel- fail. Engine- Fail. Pressure-fail. Hull-fail. Air-fail. Battery-low.

Rocky threw himself and his light translator into his biosphere and bulldozed across the lab. There had to be something in this data that would help. It had to have information on the contaminant’s source.

Rocky wiggled in front of the slap dash computer and strained to push one of his claws out the malleable panel of his ball. He couldn’t quite get to the keys. He didn’t have the reach. Fuming, he scanned around the room. The computer wouldn't survive in his atmosphere, so he couldn’t just put it through the exchange box to his xenonite habitat. Why were humans so leaky?!? He could really use one of their hands right now.

His sonar glanced off of one of Grace’s abandoned tools. It was long and slender, a ‘screw runner’, or something. He grasped at it through the biosphere’s malleable panel. After a few fumbles, he finally got a hold of it. He carefully propped up his light translator, and started poking away at the keyboard with the tool. Simon had added raised lettering to each of the keys with a soldering tool, and at the time Rocky had appreciated it, but now–– Rocky could just *[musical notes]* the guy (affectionate).

It was hard to make sense of the data. He was having to translate, convert measurements from human to Eridian, remember all of the bajillion human science words he had learned from Grace, and try and make sense of the new words these human researchers were throwing around. Rocky couldn't understand more than half of it. He was having to sound each word out, and try and remember what the words would sound like out loud.

This was bad. The data was right there, but Rocky couldn't make sense of it.

Simon was bellowing on one of the lower levels. *“I can’t hear you. You have to GO!”*

Rocky rumbled around the room. He was crashing into drawers and chairs. He could hear himself droning like he had when he was alone on his Eridian ship. He was alone. He couldn’t do this on his own, be he had to fix it!

Rocky clipped a table and Grace's laptop clattered to the floor. It was the one with the translation program.

[Loud Musical notes.]

Rocky quickly routed the black box computer into the laptop. He had to trick it into thinking someone was typing the black box data into the translation program so it would read aloud. Rocky kept fumbling through the malleable panel of his biosphere; He could only use one claw at a time.

“How fuck does Simon do this. Question?!?!”

Rocky hit the command key with the screw tool, and waited.

The automated voice sprang to life intoning all of the translated words and sounding out the rest*. IT WORKED!!*

The computer started rattling off logs, and samples. It was displaying images that his light translator was making sense of, but none of it seemed useful.

Rocky was getting a better idea of where the contamination had come from, but none of this told him anything about how to combat it. Rocky tossed his screw tool and resisted the urge to knock over the laptop too.

He wasn’t a scientist. He was an engineer. That's why he hadn’t been able to figure out the astrophage or the taumeoba on his own. That’s why he had needed Grace. He needed *Grace* to figure this out.

Rocky felt like his carapace was going to squeeze in and crush him to death. He couldn’t do this. He was going to watch his crew die again, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Rocky trumpeted angrily. A pop-up on the laptop informed him there was “no translation available” for that particular string of profanities.

Rocky stiffened his appendages and forced himself to pick up the screw tool again. He had to keep trying.

He tabbed through pages of data from the black box as fast as he could. He tried to soak up everything he was hearing. The ‘blood ocean’ had a surface temperature of 953.6° F/ 512° C… that seemed hot? Maybe? And it apparently got much hotter closer to the bottom, where the *SM-8* and *SM-13* had gone.

The ‘blood’ was also apparently very similar to human blood. Which the researchers were very hung-up on in the notes. It had an extremely similar appearance and chemical breakdown, but what was different? There had to be something different.

Rocky toggled through a few more screens.

The cell structure wasn’t the same. Rocky paused on a page, nudging his light translating device closer. It was a sample from deep down in ‘blood-ocean’. Mixed in with the familiar contamination cells… were the all-the-more familiar cells… astrophage. But that didn’t make any sense. Astrophage lived in space; it ate stars. Why would it be at the bottom of an ocean?

Rocky let himself rock back and forth on his legs. He rolled himself, trying to think. There had to be a connection.

Did astrophage eat the blood-moon contaminant? Did the blood-moon contaminant eat astrophage? Rocky rolled up to one of the counters and took a long hard listen into the fuel samples they had taken weeks ago.

The astrophage was intact, it was exactly the same as how they had left it. They already knew that the blood contaminant could get through glass, so if the astrophage and blood-moon contaminant interacted in any way— there should be more or less of it. This was a dead-end.

Rocky hummed angrily.

He needed Grace, but he’d have to settle for thinking like Grace. They had found taumeoba by looking at where there was less astrophage. If there was something on the *Hail Mary* that the contaminant didn’t like, there would be less contamination around it. Rocky scanned around the ship, clacking his vents to try and relieve his mounting panic. The contaminant was everywhere.

The only places not infected were inside his xenonite walls, but the Rocky couldn't use that to help the humans. They couldn't survive in his atmosphere, and there wasn't enough xenonite to build them a whole new habitat, even if they could figure out how to keep it sterile.

No where else on the *Hail Mary* was uninfected. Rough patches of goo were collecting everywhere from the med-suite to the cockpit. It was all over the lab too, except…

Rocky honed in on one of the bio-hazard cabinets; there were no rough patches inside, there should be. The branches and the black box had been covered in contaminants, which is why Grace had put them in the cabinet in the first place. It should be just as infected as the rest of the ship, but it wasn't. The other identical bio-hazard cabinets around the lab *were* infected. Rocky could see dull patches growing and condensation drips running down the insides of them.

The contaminant didn't like *this* specific cabinet for some reason. Why?

This cabinet was glass, same as the others. It was the same size. It was the same shape. Was the only difference the contents? The uninfected cabinet only had the life-vest they had taken off the black box, and the tree.

"The tree. The tree. THE TREE!!!"

Rocky slammed his biosphere into the cabinet hard, not bothering to find a tool to reach up and open it properly. The bottom of the cabinet bowed slightly and the door swung half open. A thin leafy branch flopped out.

Rocky was just reaching up to grab a sample when roots exploded out of the bottom. Rocky let out a shrill note and clambered back. The roots and branches twisted out from the cabinet. It grew rapidly along the ground, climbing inch by inch towards the biggest blotches of blood contamination. It wormed its way across the floor. Where the roots and branches went, the contamination was starting to thin. The texture of it turned chalky and the roots thickened. There was a low creaking sound as it reached the edges of the room. The roots and branches crawled upwards, twisting around the equipment in the lab.

Rocky could hear Simon near the airlock. He sounded like he was talking to someone, but Rocky could see he was alone. Grace was sprinting up towards the cockpit and Rocky wasn't sure his hack-job would keep him out forever. He needed to lure them in here. If the tree was eating the contamination, maybe being near it would fix them too.

Rocky listened to Grace bang his hands on the entrance to the cockpit. He was screaming.

Rocky probably couldn't just ask the humans to come here. They didn't seem like they were going to be reasonable at the moment. He rolled backwards, forcing his ball over a root that had grown in his path. The

splotches of contaminants in the lab were fading fast, this was his best shot at saving his humans. It was time to try… acting.

Rocky let out his best howl of pain. He tried to emulate the dramatics he had seen humans do on *Star Trek.*

“Oh ow! Oh Owwwwwwww” He called as loud as he could.

“Rocky!” Grace shouted from the cockpit, and made a beeline towards the lab. Rocky pushed his claw through the malleable panel of his biosphere and used his hacked control panel to kill the lights in the lab. He needed the humans to believe he was in trouble. Luckily, it was easy to stop their silly light-based eyes from seeing him.

Grace rounded the corner and started banging on the quarantine barrier. He couldn’t let Grace in yet. He needed both of them.

“Owwwww! Oh nooooooo!” Rocky moaned, trying to sound convincing. He had never done this before. *“Get Simon! Simon help,”* he tried.

Grace backed away from the barrier panting. His heart was beating faster than Rocky had ever seen before. “Hold on!” He yelled, before dashing down towards Simon.

Rocky couldn’t believe this was working. Maybe he should be an actor on one of the human shows.

Down on the airlock level, Simon had dropped the tool he had been holding. He was still talking to no one.

Grace was almost to the airlock. "Simon!” He yelled frantically.

“Grace, wait!” Simon held out his arm towards whatever he had been talking to. “Ezekiel!” He shouted. He seemed to brace himself for something before he stumbled forward looking around wildly.

Grace finally made it to the airlock. He grabbed Simon around the shoulders. “Simon! Please! I can’t get into the lab! I need you!!” He was shaking him.

Simon backed away, he was searching the corridor for something. He needed more convincing. Rocky let out a long wilting chorus. *“Ohhhh nooooooo! Ahhhhhhhhh! Saddddd, also scared… Owwwwwwwww!”*

Simon’s head snapped up towards him. That had worked somehow.

“Let’s go.” Simon said.

The two of them scrambled up towards the lab. Their progress was slow; Grace was having to help Simon up the ladder. But were coming, that's what mattered. Rocky readied himself at the panel. He would let them both in, and close the door behind them. Hopefully once they were here, where the contamination had mostly been eaten away, they would calm down.

"Owwwww so scared! Owwwwww." Rocky was laying it on thick, trying to speed them up. *"Help meeeeeeee."*

"Rocky!" Grace shouted. "We're coming! Hold on!"

This acting thing was easy.

Grace and Simon were pawing at the plexiglass door, trying to get leverage underneath it.

"Rocky!" Simon shouted, grunting with the effort he was putting into this rescue.

Rocky hit the door controls and let the door slide half open.

Laboratory barrier disengaging. Mary's crisp voice announced.

Grace shoved himself under the door and rushed inside, but Simon hesitated at the threshold.

"Grace, wait!" he shouted. He was unsteady on his feet. He hadn't had time to recover from his galavant out the airlock. Rocky needed him to come inside. He needed him to calm down.

Come on space blob, Rocky thought. *Show me you care.* Rocky layered his voice with all of the very real panic he was feeling. *"Simon! Help!"*

That did it.

Simon threw himself under the quarantine door with a half growled "Fuck me."

Rocky slammed the door back down and tried to keep still while the humans got their bearings. They were both still panicking. Simon was shouting at something, and he was pushing Grace behind him protectively.

What if this didn't work? What if they were broken forever, and they never stopped acting freak out?

Rocky remembered he had turned out the lights, and quickly reached over to turn them back on. Maybe if they could see, they'd calm down. Rocky

heard the faint hum of the lights come on, and the human’s heart rates started to normalize.

Grace gasped, and he and Simon spun around towards Rocky.

“Humans done acting freak out. Question?” Rocky asked.

*Chapter End Notes: This is me formally retiring the blender. [aside] Alexa, play taps. I commend you to the stars you beautiful machine. *grinding sounds growing ever more distant as it drifts into the night**

Chapter 36: Astrophage Class 401

Chapter Summary: Grace reviews Rocky's notes while the tree chows down on tasty tasty contamination.

Grace grimaced as he felt another nail pound into the coffin of his "water isn’t necessary for life” hypothesis. He was going through Rocky's annotations of the black box data. It wasn’t looking good for his research career, not that he had one anymore. Was he technically unemployed now? Was his job just… space? Grace shook his head, trying to focus. The blood-moon contamination was mostly out of his system, but he was still a little disoriented.

According to the notes, Rocky hypothesized that astrophage, (the kind that made up the Petrova lines) acted like spores, looking for tasty stars that could support it. And once it had absorbed enough light, (we're talking after millions of years,) it metamorphosized into… Simon had called it a ‘blood-moon’ and that was maddeningly accurate.

Sure, it wasn’t a moon— it was the last remnants of a star, whittled down to moon-size with with the metamorphosized final lifestage of atsrophage wrapped around it. And sure, it wasn't blood— at least not human blood— but it was stupidly similar.

Somehow, a form of life that lived in space, *ate stars,* and whose adult imago stage was planet-sized, had almost the same composition as the blood found in mammals on Earth.

It was mostly water (Grace could just spit he was so mad). The ‘blood’ also seemed to serve the same function in the moon's oceanic body as it did in human or animal circulatory systems. It distributed nutrients and energy to the cells farther away from its heart (the last remnants of the star); It seemed to regulate the moon’s temperature; it even had an immune system that had tried to kill them.

Space was so big and so stupid, it could apparently only come up with so many kinds of life.

Grace scrolled to the end of Rocky’s notes, where he had added two Hubble-Bubble scans of the blood-moon. The first scan, from before the *Hail Mary* had physically been in the system, looked like a regular spherical moon. The second scan looked more familiar. It was how the moon had looked when

Grace had seen it in person, like a Pollock splatter painting. Rocky had copy-pasted a note from the Eridian-to-English translator. ***"Sneeze."***

Well… that explained how Simon and the *SM-13* had ended up in space.

Grace rubbed his eyes and looked over to Simon who floated nearby. Simon had his hand wrapped around the lip of the doorway to stay in one place. He was watching out the quarantine door as the slowly spreading roots and branches took over the ship.

"I have some answers for you," Grace told him.

Grace and Simon were 'confined to quarters' in the lab until the tree did its thing. They had brought in the rest of the root ball from the *SM-13*, and had slowed the ship down so that gravity wouldn't hinder the tree's access to all the hard-to-reach corners.

Rocky was sleeping in his biosphere which was gently drifting around the room. Once he had been sure his humans were okay (and that they weren't going to do anything stupid) he hunkered down, said *"Watch,"* and went dormant.

He was probably going to be asleep for a while. The last 24 hours... 72 hours... the last few weeks had been a lot.

Simon looked over his shoulder at him, and Grace took that as permission to science-dump.

Grace clasped his hands together and put himself in teacher mode. "Basically, the moon you were on is a massive multicellular life form. It looks like astrophage—the kind we're used to— is basically spores. Once it starts really chowing down on a star it metamorphosizes into a… into a giant, blood-astrophage ocean. And that sorta wraps around the star to finish eating it."

His teacher stance wasn't working, he was floating away. Grace hooked his foot under a stray root to keep himself in place as he continued. "Its blood is — Well, it has an immune system just like us, and that's what we've been dealing with here."

Grace had hoped that knowing would be comforting to Simon, but Simon's face was unreadable. He could only imagine what Simon had experienced while fully immersed in the stuff while in the *SM-13*. Simon had come in

contact with enough of it that it had actually managed to start eating him alive. Grace tried to push down the lingering memory of Yáo and Stratt in the cockpit. If just the amount Grace had inhaled had done that… No wonder Simon had been so freaked out when he got to the *Hail Mary*.

“The contamination was basically trying to dissolve us,” Grace continued. “—same way our white blood cells work, by producing antibody proteins to attach to the foreign organism, us, and destroying it. Our brains don’t like getting eaten so they… wigged out.”

Simon didn’t say anything.

Grace tentatively pulled himself to the edge of the counter, closer to Simon. “I think you should know. You did get the black box to the surface.” He could see Simon’s shoulders raise slightly, listening. “I can see in the log that the sensors registered it making contact with air and activating its beacon. After that, when the blood moon expelled you, it must have blasted the black box to space too.” The side of Simon’s face that Grace could see was still stoney. He wished he could read Simon better. He wished he knew what he was thinking. “Simon, we never would have been able to figure this out without it.”

Simon took a long breath. Grace could see Simon’s head bow slightly as he watched the tree wind itself around the ship. Roots crawled up walls, greedily consuming the blood-moon contamination. Leaves were unfurling in real time, creating ever-changing dapples of shadow under the artificial lights.

“How is it growing so fast?” Simon asked, finally breaking his silence.

Grace had no idea.

He fished his laptop out of the air and scanned through Rocky’s notes. “Maybe… the nutrients in the metamorphized astrophage is similar enough to what trees evolved to use?” Grace let the laptop drift away again. Rocky’s half translated notes weren’t helping all that much.

“I mean it's jam packed with already processed sunlight since the blood moon is eating a star. It’s basically a packet of super-bioavailable *everything* that a tree could need. It's got nitrogen, it’s got potassium, iron… everything!” Grace gestured out into the hall, “Pair that with our CO2 rich atmosphere; it must have triggered rapid growth and just—” he made an explosion sound and jazzed his hands.

At the doorway, Simon’s jaw was working. “How did it…” he trailed off before finishing. “How did it keep me alive?”

Grace really, *really* had no idea.

Simon had been cocooned in this tree for however long he was drifting in space. He had had no life support, no protection from the cold, just the tree that had wrapped around him for some reason.

“I don’t know… it just… it must have made a little bubble of O2? And the heat from all of the contamination in the sub must have kept you from freezing, and…” Grace was grasping at straws. “I don’t know,” he finally said.

It was an insane cosmic coincidence. Grace could study everything that had happened and the odds of any of it working out for a thousand years, and he would probably only succeed at driving himself crazy. But Grace couldn’t bring himself to cite a miracle.

“It’s better than the alternative.” Stratt had told him once.

Grace pushed off the wall and joined Simon in the doorway. “I guess it was just…” he didn’t know how to say this. “I guess it was just that you were worth saving.”

Simon finally looked up at Grace, his expression soft and stricken. Grace could see him biting the inside of his cheeks. Simon nodded quickly and wiped at his eyes. “Yeah,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Guess so.”

Chapter End Notes: Heads up, we're reaching the last handful of chapters I have planned for this fic. Thank you so much for coming along for the ride with me!

Chapter 37: Promise

Chapter Summary: In the aftermath of everything. Simon and Grace get to know each other again. All three of the Hail Mary crew make promises to each other.

Grace lingered over the counter in the lab. His eyes were burning; he couldn't look at the data anymore, but he didn't know what else to do. Simon was still floating in the doorway, picking at a package of sour Skittles. After their previous conversation about Rocky's notes the talk had died out.

Simon had been watching the tree for hours. The growth outside seemed to have slowed down, and Grace couldn't see any more contamination outside. But, they had promised Rocky they would stay put till he woke up. Grace and Simon were locked in the lab together until then, and the silence between them was starting to weigh on Grace. They had needed to tell each other so much. Where could they possibly go from here? Grace knew it wouldn't be the same between them after… But he had hoped…

Grace cleared his throat. "Simon I… I would like to know you better," he said tentatively.

Simon's shoulders tensed. "I told you everything. I promise."

"No, no—" Grace said quickly. "I believe you— that you told me about Eden and what happened I… I mean *you*."

"There's… there's not…" Simon paused. "What else would there be?"

That hung between them. Grace chewed his lip and watched Rocky's biosphere drift overhead for a moment. "Do you like sweet foods or savory foods?" He tried

Simon shook his head and turned away, looking out towards the tree.

Grace felt his heart sink into his stomach. He looked down at his shoelaces, watching them drift in the zero-G. He knew it couldn't be the same between them now, but it was like they were strangers again.

Quietly, almost inaudibly, Simon said "I don't know."

Grace's head snapped up. Simon was looking at him ruefully.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I... I don't... I've never thought— It was safer not to... want things." Grace pulled himself along the counter, to get closer. Simon ducked his eyes away. "I ...want to know you, Grace. But I..." he trailed off.

The air between them was heavy.

"I'm scared too." Grace said. "I'm scared you may not... I'm scared that now that you know that I'm not who you thought I was— We might not..."

Simon watched his lips, his expression transparent and conflicted. He chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment. "I think I like sweet." He searched Grace's face. "Can I… ask?"

"Yeah. Anything."

Simon held up the package of Skittles and twisted it tightly closed. "These are lava."

Grace laughed softly. "Yeah."

Simon pushed the Skittles towards Grace. "Do you like sweet or salty?" The candies drifted lazily through the air into Grace's hands.

Grace turned the package over, considering. "I'm a savory guy," he said "Or spicy. I like spicy stuff."

Simon nodded, taking this information to heart.

Grace pushed the candies back towards Simon. "Do you like music?"

The Skittles floated in a slow arc into Simon's hand and he held them for a long moment. "When I was a kid, we used to sing hymns under the Tree. When there were so many of us it didn't matter if you could sing well, with all of the voices it didn't matter. I... liked that."

He sent the Skittles back, drifting towards Grace. "Do you miss home… Earth?"

The Skittles wrapper twisted open slightly, and a few candies spilled out into the air. "I... yeah. I miss Earth a lot." Grace picked the colorful dots out of the air one by one. "I miss the fog, and I miss my kids— I was a teacher. I miss teaching." Grace popped a drifting yellow Skittle into his mouth and twisted the package back closed. "I miss Earth, but I... sometimes I can't even imagine going back. It's been 5 years for me on the *Hail Mary,* but because of how time works at speed... it would be nearly 30 years difference by the time I got back. *If* I could get back. So much would have changed."

Grace sent the candies drifting back to Simon. "Do you… do you miss home?"

"I… shouldn't… but I…" Simon caught the package and tentatively twisted it open. He watched the different colors float out and selected a green one. He rolled it between his fingers. "…but I do. I… I miss my Brothers. Even after…" He cleared his throat and twisted the package back closed. "And I miss feeling like I knew what I was supposed to do. Even though it was fucked, and I didn’t want to—I—but I…don't know what I am here. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that I have a choice."

He sent the Skittles back in a lazy arc. "Why is yellow your favorite? Color I mean."

Grace caught them with a laugh. "I don't know really… I just, I guess at some point when I was a kid I decided I liked it, and it stuck. It…. makes me happy." Grace looked up at Simon. "Can I come closer?"

Simon nodded and pulled himself back slightly, making room beside him in the doorway.

Grace pushed off the counter and settled close to Simon. He wrapped his hand around the door frame so he didn't float away. Grace passed the Skittles to Simon. "You said blue was your favorite color. Why blue?"

Simon huffed a laugh and averted his eyes down to the floor. "… It wasn't, until I said it. I… liked the way the sky looked on the holodeck. And when you asked, I was just realizing your eyes were the same color and I… that's what came out." He offered the candies back to Grace. "Do you think Rocky’s planet will have a blue sky?"

Grace accepted the Skittles and pulled the package back open. "I don't think so. I think Erid is pretty dark. But maybe we can dismantle the 'holodeck' and take it down with us. Then we can see Earth's sky whenever we want." The Skittles drifted up out of the wrapper and hung between them. Grace tapped a green Skittle, sending it wobbling towards Simon. "How do you feel about going to Erid? You didn't really get a choice."

Simon plucked the Skittle out of the air and rolled it with the others in his hand. "I… I don't know. I don't have anywhere else to go, and if Rocky is there and you are … I… I think that’s where I want to be, if— if that's still… okay."

"Yeah. Yeah I'm— I'm really glad you're here."

Simon was looking down at the floor again. "Even after... Even knowing everything?"

Grace plucked a yellow skittle from the remaining floating candies. "Yes." Grace chewed thoughtfully. "I... I'm glad I know, but I think this—" he gestured between them, and to the skittles in the air "I think *this* has told me more about you than what you told me about Filament and Eden."

Grace sent the last green candy floating towards Simon. "Can I touch you?" Grace asked.

Simon looked surprised, and the candy hit his chest before he reached up to scoop it into his hand. "Yeah... yeah I'd… mmh hmm."

Grace shifted and pushed himself closer. Simon didn't move, unsure. Grace laughed. "I was thinking I'd hold your hand but you've got Skittles in it."

"Right." Simon popped them in his mouth and extended his hand. Grace took it and let himself drift watching the last few Skittles scatter in the air.

Simon squeezed his hand once. "I... I can't think of any more questions, but I want to keep talking…"

Grace nodded. "Me too."

"I... I'm sorry. For everything." Simon said softly. "For fucking everything up and... what happened when I… the airlock."

Grace squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry I freaked out on you after you woke up. I shouldn't have."

Simon huffed a laugh. "No. I think that was shit I needed to hear."

They were drifting now and Grace reached out to steadied them against the door frame

"Simon..."

"Yeah?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Simon's hand spasmed in Grace's. "You want to?"

Grace nodded. "I do, if that's okay."

Simon studied Grace’s face before he finally nodded. "Yeah."

Grace tugged Simon closer, one hand still wrapped around the door frame, and kissed him. Simon's fingers unclasped around Grace's and he entwined their fingers so they were palm to palm. This kiss wasn't hungry like their past kisses had been. This was slow, tentative. It was weighed down, even while they floated weightless.

Grace broke their kiss, keeping close. He pressed his forehead into Simon's and whispered, "Can I ask you for something?"

Simon nodded against him. "Anything, Grace I… anything."

Grace swallowed, choosing to be brave. "I told you I've never gotten this right. I… we— can we promise to— And even if it…” Grace couldn’t find the right words. What he was asking for was too big. “…Can we try anyway?"

Simon pulled his hand up, still holding Grace's, and tapped his chest just over his heart. "Promise."

Grace pressed his lips against Simon’s again. He tasted salt and realized there were tears streaming down his face. The weight of the last few days, the last few *weeks* came crashing down on him, but more than that— the relief he was feeling was flooding through him. Simon let go of Grace's hand and wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

Grace broke their kiss and buried his face in Simon’s neck. Grace’s chest ached and he couldn't get close enough to Simon, even pressed against him. He still felt like he still needed to somehow close the distance. His hands clutched the fabric of Simon's shirt.

"Oh God," Grace sobbed into Simon's shoulder.

Simon held him tighter and Grace could feel Simon's breath hitching against his chest. Grace could feel tears falling from Simon's chin into his hair.

"All of it— we—" Grace couldn't breathe. His body was finally catching up to the panic it had been collecting. "We could have— If you hadn't woken up— if Rocky hadn’t— we—"

"I know." Simon said, his voice was hoarse and barely audible.

Grace heard a sharp tap from behind them, and he turned his face to see Rocky had woken up. He was drifting overhead and had two of his claws pressed against the xenonite of his biosphere.

"Humans leaking. Not freak out please. Question? Grace and Simon okay. Question?"

"Yeah bud. We're okay.” Grace laughed through his tears. “Promise we’re not acting freak out anymore. You okay?"

Rocky wiggled in his floating sphere. "Okay. Can Rocky come there. Question? Join. Question?"

Grace pulled away from Simon and reached up for Rocky’s ball. Simon drifted with him, pulling Rocky down into the door frame. They huddled together, the humans sniffling, and Eridian humming.

Rocky pressed himself against the side of his ball between Grace and Simon. "Rocky afraid before. Afraid lose Grace and Simon. Afraid to lose crew again. Scared scared scared."

"I'm sorry, Rock." Grace murmured.

Rocky hummed unintelligibly for a moment. Simon's fingers were rubbing up and down the side of the ball, hovering over Rocky’s carapace.

"Humans really okay. Question? Not freak out anymore. Question?"

"Yeah I promise." Grace whispered. "We're okay. You fixed it, Rock. You fixed it."

Rocky hummed and vibrated. His carapace sunk and his legs drooped limply around him.

"Glad. Grace and Simon okay. Glad, glad, glad, glad. But still scared. Rocky not know why still scared. Should be glad."

Grace wrapped his arms tighter around the ball. "We're scared too, bud. I think we all just need to be scared for a minute. We'll be okay. We're all okay."

Simon pressed his hand against the malleable panel on Rocky’s ball, and Rocky pushed his claw through to wrap around Simon’s fingers.

"Okay, Question? Really okay. Question?"

Simon nodded, and Rocky’s hums slowly quieted. He didn't relinquish Simon's hand.

Tentatively Simon murmured "Rocky, you heard what I told Grace before, yeah? About Eden, about the things I've... what I’ve..."

Rocky clattered his carapace. "Rocky hear. Know that Grace and Simon both not tell whole truth before. Mad at Grace and Simon. But more mad, mad, mad at Earth humans and Eden humans."

"Rock—" Simon started

Rocky trumpeted loudly and cut him off. *"Glad Simon and Grace coming to Erid. Erid nicer."* His carapace clattered with finality. Simon snapped his mouth shut and Rocky continued with a humming huff. *"Rocky finish drones later."* He settled against the edge of his biosphere, still not relinquishing Simon's hand. *"Grace and Simon, promise not be stupid for at least 12 hours."*

Simon and Grace nodded.

Rocky lifted all four of his unoccupied claws and pointed forcefully at his humans. *"Promise. Question!?"*

"Yeah, we promise Rocky."

" Promise."

Rocky relaxed. "Okay. We watch Star Trek, then Rocky and humans get back to work. Rocky, Grace, and Simon save humans and save stars."

Chapter 38: Horizon

Chapter Summary: Simon takes note of the tree's growth and tries to untangle what happened to him on the SM-13.

Gravity had been restored and the *Hail Mary* was once again hurdling towards Rocky's planet. Simon lingered near the air lock, where the tree had settled the bulk of its roots. The tree seemed to be at a stalemate with the contamination leaking in through the hull, and its growth seemed to have slowed down. It was keeping the contaminant in check, and as far as Simon, Grace, and Rocky could tell, the tree itself was harmless.

Grace and Rocky were off in other parts of the ship doing science stuff that was way above Simon's head. He'd done everything he could to help, and they had asked him to keep an eye on the tree for any changes. Simon glanced at the markings he had put various places around roots and branches to track growth. There was no change since yesterday; it must really have stabilized. Simon marked the current date and time with an expo marker and stepped back.

Being under the tree made Simon feel strange. The familiar shape of the roots made his stomach clench, but he didn't want to leave. It reminded him of watching Grace impatiently try to drink his too-hot tea before it had cooled down. Simon's body kept recoiling at the all-too-familiar, pain-loaded image of the tree, but he couldn't stay away. He felt like he had to keep gulping in the sight of the leaves, the branches, the seeds.

It was beautiful. The tree spanned the whole ship now. Its broad five-point leaves fluttered gently in the air circulation. Its branches had wrapped around everything, corkscrewing out at odd symmetrical angles. It created messy splashes of green against the otherwise sterile white walls.

Helicopter seeds spiraled gently down from the branches above. Each one sent Simon's heart into his throat. He was so afraid it would start shedding its leaves in bunches, like the Last Tree had before it died. It wasn't the Last Tree— it was obviously the same kind of tree, since it came from one of its seeds, but it wasn't *the* Last Tree. Simon had to keep reminding himself of that. It wasn't the same tree. He wasn't under the Last Tree anymore.

Simon sat down and leaned against the airlock hatch. He entwined his fingers in the roots under him.

He wanted to remember how this had happened, how the tree had saved him. He had been trying to put the pieces together between what Grace had told him and the last seconds he could remember from inside the sub. It was a bloody drowning mess. He remembered the eel, the eye, the teeth. But that might not have been real. It may have been like Eden's footsteps on the *Hail Mary's* hull, or Ezekiel by the airlock.

The eel *had* existed though, or some version of it. He had seen the photos from the black box on Grace's laptop. Grace had given him some meandering comparison to 'gut-bacteria' or 'possibly some sort of parasite,' but he didn't seem to know for sure.

Simon disentangled his fingers from the roots and took a steadying breath. He wanted to know what had really happened. He bit the inside of his cheek and tried to remember the last moments in the *SM-13* without putting himself back inside. He was on the *Hail Mary,* not the sub.

The *SM-13's* camera hummed, sharp and low. Light flashed in bursts, casting dark, sporadic shadows in the blood in front of him.

You saw the horror of it. What did it see in you?

Simon's own blood was trickling down his side, out of what was left of his arm, mixing with the blood pouring through the porthole. He held the black box tight, thumbing the sheath strapped to the life vest. "It's more than me. It's more than me." Simon let it float and hauled himself to his feet, grunting in pain. "It's more than me…"

It saw you Simon, and it will never let you go.

Simon could see the blips on the navigation screen picking up pace. It was close. It was coming for him.

The sub turned on its head, and he was thrown backwards into the knee-deep blood. Thin, needle-like teeth shrieked against the metal of the hull. Blood crashed in around him. The eel had him in its mouth. There was no escape.

Your ship is alive, can't you see this is a mercy?

Rage and fear warred in Simon's chest. "Fine! You want the Butcher!? COME ON!!"The fire extinguisher was suddenly in his hand. He felt a roar bubble out of his throat, and he threw himself at the eel's teeth. He smashed the fire extinguisher into the ivory spears until it cracked—

Simon opened his eyes to the *Hail Mary's* bright corridor and the meandering branches of the tree.

That didn't make sense. The teeth. Simon knew how pressurized vessels worked. Any puncture should have catastrophically imploded the sub right then and there. Simon forced himself to breathe, and mentally dismissed the teeth. They probably hadn't been there. The eel may have been real, but that couldn't have been what happened.

The blood though. There didn't need to be a leak for the blood to get in. Rocky and Grace had discovered that blood-contaminant could leech through metal. It must have built up in the hull, and in between the glass port hole and the cover. When the pressure had been too much it—

Hull breach.

He was floundering, drowning in the blood. He was disintegrating in it. Lights were flashing against his eyelids. He couldn't breathe.

Hull breach.

Blood was surging in. Something tugged him down under, drowning him. It was wrapped around his wrist. Blood had gotten between the panes of the medallion, and it was suddenly heavy. It was pulling him down, tangling him below the surface.

Branches exploded out from the medallion, and the tree pressed out with volatile speed. It breached the hull, and in an instant, everything was crunching inward. The weight of the blood ocean threatened to crush him into nothing. But the rapidly growing branches were pressing out on the hull, keeping it from collapsing in on him. Roiling heat and blood flooded through the ruptured metal and Simon was suddenly pressed into the floor with incredible force. The turbulent waves of the blood in the sub flattened around him. He and the sub were being propelled outward at lung-crushing speed.

An instant later, he was weightless. The blood floated around him; there was so much blood. It was dark, and he felt suddenly numb. His lungs were so hungry for air—

Simon stood up and tried to shake the image out of his head. That was enough of that. He steadied himself against the airlock's frame and breathed in. He let cool metal pull him out of his mind and back into the *Hail Mary*.

He didn't need to know that badly. He was here. That's what mattered, and he didn't want to scrutinize this gift too closely and offend whatever god had given it to him.

Simon patted one of the tree's branches affectionately and ducked under it. He had seen Grace pass this way earlier. Maybe he needed a hand with whatever he was working on.

Simon rounded the corner, pausing to look out the cupola window. The tree had grown in a curling spiral, reaching out for the stars with lush green. Simon felt something tug in his chest. This place had brought him back so many things that he never thought he'd see again.

Ahead, light poured out of the entrance to the 'holodeck.' The pale flickering blue light was joined by the sound of roaring waves as Simon got closer and Simon hesitated in the doorway. The dull thrumming made the hair on his neck tingle, but he could make out Grace's shadow inside. He wanted to see him.

Grace was cross-legged on the floor with a laptop balanced on one knee. His glasses hung crooked under his nose, and the lenses fogged as he let out a long sigh. He was deeply engrossed in something on his screen and didn't notice Simon until he knocked on the doorframe. "Hey."

Grace looked up, startled by Simon's appearance. "Huh?"

"Can I help?" Simon asked, pointing at Grace's laptop.

"Oh! I should probably put it down actually. It's my third time going over it." Grace pointed at the tiny numbers that dotted the laptop's screen. "I'm just scared I'll miss something. Come on in!"

Simon lingered in the doorway, steeling himself against the low roar of the projected ocean. "Oh! Sorry! Here, let me switch it." Grace started to stand up.

"No, I want to see," Simon said quickly.

He stepped inside and turned in a slow circle to take it in. The horizon went as far as he could see, farther even. Foamy waves crashed into a rocky beach at Grace's feet, and fog drifted lazily over massive boulders that

dotted the shore. Simon still couldn’t shake the prickling discomfort of an open sky. He knew it was normal for Grace, but he couldn’t imagine looking out at a real horizon with nothing to hold you in.

Grace slid the laptop off his lap, twisting to watch Simon’s reaction. “You sure?”

Simon nodded. “Yeah.”

It wasn’t a blood ocean. It was an Earth ocean, and the roar wasn’t against the hull of a submarine. It looked cold and crisp, the way the rain projection had looked.

Simon sat down next to Grace, leaning against the back wall. Touching the boundaries helped break the illusion. “What are you working on?” He asked.

Grace tilted the screen so Simon could see. “I was just double-checking all the tests we ran on the tree’s sap.”

“That’s good,” Simon said. That was the last problem off their list.

With the ambient sound of the ocean waves, Simon had to focus to parse what Grace was saying.

“Seems totally normal. Like weirdly normal considering what it’s eating.”

Simon watched Grace’s lips as he prattled off the various proteins and enzymes he had tested for and nodded along. He got the gist, but he let himself indulge a few stray thoughts about pressing his own lips to Grace's or putting them to work somewhere else.

Grace clicked through a few more pages on the laptop, and Simon pulled himself back to attention as Grace finished with: “So… yeah. Just a tree. And it seems to have pretty much stopped growing, too. Thanks for collecting those samples and measurements, by the way. That was a huge help.”

“Glad I did it right.”

Rocky rolled into the door frame in his biosphere. There were a few loose tools rattling around in there with him.

“Drones done. Rocky sleep. Humans watch.”

“Oh!” Grace said. “That’s great!”

Rock rolled his ball onto the grated floor beside them and hunkered down.

“Wait, do you want to sleep in here? Did you already eat?” Grace asked.

“Rocky sleep now. Statement.” Rocky settled stiffly on the bottom of his ball and seemed to freeze in place.

“Okayyy…” Grace said.

Simon shrugged at Grace. “Guess he’s tired.”

“Good night… You already out, bud?” Grace asked tentatively. Rocky didn’t respond. Grace shrugged back at Simon. “Guess so.”

Simon snorted. “I would be tired too if I had to deal with both of us chucklefucks.”

Grace laughed, and it soothed some of the lingering tension in Simon’s gut. He leaned slightly against Grace and looked around the beach again. It was wide open, the only break in the horizon was the drifting fog. It was hard to believe a place like that could exist.

“You said this is where you lived?” Simon asked.

Grace nodded, “Close by, yeah. I went as often as I could.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, watching the waves peak and crash. Simon was glad Grace had let the projection keep playing. The beach was beautiful; he wished he could see the real thing with Grace someday.

Grace’s head fell gently against Simon’s shoulder. He said something, but Simon couldn’t make it out with his face turned away.

“Sorry, didn’t hear.”

“Right,” Grace picked up his head and scooted so Simon could see his face, but now he was further away. “Wait,” Simon said, pulling Grace close again.

Grace giggled. This was an odd angle for both of them. Simon was only half turned towards him, and Grace was half kneeling, half leaning against the wall.

“Here.” Grace said and scooched so his legs were draped over Simon’s. They were nestled close enough to wrap their arms around each other again. Grace looked up at Simon. “This better?”

Simon nodded, his heart flopping happily against his ribs. He cleared his throat. “Yeah. What did you say?”

“Oh!” A flush of pink spread over Grace’s cheeks. “I uh… I just said that I—” Simon watched Grace hesitate, his lips and tongue lingering in a ‘luh’ sound before he swallowed. “I’m— I’m really glad you’re here.”

Simon nodded sagely and pulled Grace close so he could rest his chin on Grace’s head. He tried to suppress the smug smile crawling across his face. “Hmmm,” he considered letting the moment pass, but landed on saying, “I love you too, dipshit.”

Grace squirmed against his chest and broke away “How did you—?!” Simon laughed, and Grace continued to splutter. “I mean— I– I love you— you too I —”

Simon pressed his lips to Grace's, silencing the babbling. When he pulled away, Grace was somehow pinker than he had been before. “I— I was worried maybe I shouldn’t say that… you know so soon.”

“Is that a thing?”

“On Earth yeah, I guess.” Grace laughed and rubbed his face with both hands. “Not that it matters out here, huh?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Simon saw Rocky reach for a note-taking tool inside the biosphere. “Hey!” Simon interjected.

Grace turned, and Rocky went limp again, one of his claws still wrapped around his notes.

“You said you were sleeping, you liar!” Grace accused.

Rocky wiggled his appendages sheepishly. *“Not lying. Is acting.”*

Chapter End Notes: Rocky is best actor. Statement. Flawless performance. Every time.

Chapter 39: Just a Tree

Chapter Summary: The trio check off the last two items on their 'doom list' and get back on the road to Erid.

Grace stood at the base of the ladder near the airlock. Simon was leaning out half way up to carefully prune back the tree. It didn't need much managing. So far, it had been a remarkably well behaved blood-eating tree. It hadn't busted through any important ship stuff, and it didn't seem to be haunted (not even a little bit)! Which was a relief.

It really was just a regular maple tree. Other than its rapid maturity and it apparently adapting to consume the blood-moon contaminant— it did normal tree stuff. It converted CO2 to O2, its sap was completely normal, and it didn't have any corrosive or psychotropic properties as far as Grace could tell.

Simon held out the tree clippings, and Grace reached up and caught them as they dropped. They were going to send some root samples and seeds to the humans in the WISE 0855-0714 system using the probes Rocky had built. They had also decided to send another probe to Earth, with extra information and some blood-moon samples.

"Great!" Grace called up to Simon. "Once we get the probes sent, all we'll need to do is solve our food problem!"

Grace's doom checklist was down to one item, and that felt so good.

Simon squinted down at him with a confused expression.

"What?" Grace asked.

Simon gestured around to the tree. "You said the sap was normal."

Grace paused. "Yeah… it is…? What does that have to do with— OH MY GOD!"

Simon laughed. "I thought you put that together. It's a sugar maple, we can drink the sap, or boil it down. I was wondering why we hadn't collected more once you checked it."

Grace covered his face, laughing in embarrassment. "Oh thank God you're here. I would have just moped around forever before I even thought about the sap." Grace patted the tree's thick, winding trunk. "Good tree."

Simon laughed and started down the ladder. “Yeah, saving our asses *again*.”

Grace stepped back so Simon could hop off the ladder. He had a bit of tree stuck in his hair. It looked like it might be one of the seeds it had been dropping. Simon turned in a slow circle scanning the branches with wonder. He looked simultaneously at home here, and like he’d never seen anything like it.

A helicopter seed twirled down from one of the branches and settled on the floor next to Simon’s foot. He picked it up gingerly and added it to the clippings in Grace’s hand. “They’ll want as many of these as we can give them,” he said reverently.

Grace nodded and carefully pulled out the seed that was stuck in Simon’s hair. “We’ll send them plenty, he said. “But I think you should keep this one.” Grace held the seed out to Simon and he took it, his eyes soft. He held it like it was a butterfly, like it was the most important thing in the world, and maybe it was.

“Come on,” Grace said gently. “Rocky is waiting for us.”

Simon nodded and curled his fingers carefully around the seed. “Yeah, let’s get this done.”

They needed to launch the probes in the opposite direction they were traveling, but they didn’t want to stop the *Hail Mary* again. They had lost enough time and fuel already. They didn’t want to have to stop and start again, so they had come up with a plan to slingshot around a nearby planet. They would launch the beetles when they were rounding the back-end (heading towards Earth and the WISE system), then circle back around and use the inertia to shoot themselves towards Erid.

In all honesty, Simon and Rocky had come up with most of the plan. Grace had just confirmed that the *Hail Mary* could handle it, and agreed to push the button to launch Rocky’s beetle-probes.

Grace hauled himself up into the cockpit and glanced at the small planet they were orbiting. It was greyish-orange, and kind of looked like a melted orange-sicle.

Simon came up the ladder behind him and Grace gestured to the pilot's seat. "You steer."

Simon smiled and took over control from the auto pilot.

Their ride around the planet was smooth. Simon had learned the controls by heart, and seemed at home in the cockpit. He flicked a few switches, and the view of orange-sicle planet rotated slowly in the side window. Simon nodded to Rocky once he had pulled them into a safe orbit.

"Optimal beetle launch. 12 minutes." Rocky said.

Grace saluted and headed up towards the beetle-launch platform in the nose of the *Hail Mary*.

The three xenonite beetles were locked and loaded, ready for him. All he needed to do was open the hatch and use Rocky's modified controls to activate their pre-programmed flight. He took a deep breath, checked his watch, and after the 12 minutes elapsed he hit 'go.'

The Rocky-beetles lowered out of sight and Grace could see on his control screen two blips split off towards WISE 0855-0714, and the third curve towards Earth.

Grace's mind trailed after the probes as he made his way down the ladder. He would never know how their arguments would be received. They wouldn't know *if* the humans in the WISE system ever got them. But he was glad they had tried.

Earlier that day they had recorded explanations to go along with the data for Eden and the Consolidation.

"Okay, we ready?" Grace said, stepping back from the camera.

"Rocky ready for close up."

Simon shifted uncomfortably but nodded.

"Okay! This is the easy part, I promise." Grace told Simon.

He settled himself between Simon and Rocky in the frame, and gave a friendly wave. "Hello! My name is Dr. Ryland Grace, from Earth. I am the scientist aboard the *Hail Mary.* This is our engineer Rocky."

Grace gestured to him, and Rocky sang his full name and the computer translated. “*Hello name Rocky, from Erid. Engineer.”*

“And this is Simon, our pilot.”

Simon looked up and nodded. He hesitated a moment before adding “Simon, from— from Eden.”

Grace carried on. “The information and samples in this probe will help you save your star. I understand from talking to Simon that you call what’s happened the ‘Quiet Rapture’. The dimming of your stars and the apparent disappearance of the planets and stars around you is caused by a single-celled organism called astrophage. It is absorbing light which is making it so any light-based information cannot make it to you. So it’s tricking your telescopes, and your eyes into thinking everything is gone. The stars are still out here. What you need to do, is follow the instructions we’ve included. You'll need to breed the taumeoba, and release it into the atmosphere of the planet where astrophage is breeding.”

Grace looked over to his companions. “What else?”

“The blood-moon,” Simon prompted.

“Right,” Grace turned back to the camera. “The blood-moons are the final life stage of astrophage. We probably can’t reverse the damage to the stars that have become blood-moons so uh, maybe steer clear of them. They are like a huge… animal? Basically? Maybe more like a bacteria colony. Anyway, introducing taumeoba to its atmosphere may stop it from infecting nearby planets, but that’s not a guarantee. Prioritize your star first.”

“Blood-moon contamination dangerous to humans." Rocky added. "Make humans act freak out. Do not open unless prepared. Contamination can breach most materials. Cannot breach xenonite. Tree can eat it.”

“Right!” Grace rubbed the back of his neck. “We learned that the hard way.” He looked over at Simon and Rocky again. “Pretty much everything is written out in the instructions too. Are we good to wrap up with final thoughts?”

“Yes.” Rocky stood tall. *“Want to remember crew of Rocky first ship. Brave Eridians. They help save stars. Not here to see stars safe, but you will know their names. Important.”* Rocky sang the names of his 22 crew members and settled on his base. *“Brave.”*

Grace nodded. “I also want to remember Yáo Li-Jie and Olesya Ilyukhina from Earth. They came out here to save the stars too. They were very brave.

I hope…” Grace swallowed the lump in his throat. “I hope you’ll remember them too.”

Grace glanced at Simon. He was looking down at the floor and didn’t seem to want to talk. Grace let a second pass, but decided not to push him.

“Okay, if that’s all, we—”

Grace took a step towards the camera but Simon grabbed his hand. “Wait— can I add something?”

“Yeah, of course.” Grace stepped back to Simon’s side. He could see Simon’s jaw working for a moment before he finally looked up and started speaking in what Grace realized must be Eden Enochian.

Grace wasn’t sure what he was saying at first but his words were halting and laced with pain.

Simon shook his head, but his words became more certain as he continued in English. “If the old man is still alive— The Father, never let him touch another one of you. Don’t listen to a fucking word he says. The stars are alive. The seeds we sent you will grow. You can live. It’s not the *last* tree. There’s hope, you don’t have to wait for whatever's beyond the veil. After everything, I know how hard it will be to believe it. I know I’m the wrong person to say this but you… you can…” Simon took an unsteady breath, but there was certainty in his voice. “Live. It’s worth it.”

Rocky’s probes had disappeared out of range and Grace dropped back down the ladder into the cockpit. They had already come up on the other side of the small planet and had Simon had slung them out of its orbit. They were back on their way towards Erid.

“Grace!!” Rocky was wiggling enthusiastically in his biosphere, pointing at the screen displaying live feed from the Hubble-Bubble. It was showing the edge of the 40 Eridani system. *“Home home home!!”*

“Oh my God!” Grace exclaimed and wrapped his arms around Rocky’s ball. “Rocky, that’s amazing!”

“Oh! Oh! Home!” Rocky hummed. “Simon do hug too! Simon do hug with Rocky and Grace!”

Simon chuckled and dismounted from the pilot's seat. He wrapped his arm around Rocky’s ball and his fingers slid over Grace’s.

It would be a few years until they arrived at Erid, but Grace could feel it on the horizon.

Home.

Chapter 40: Epilogue: Grace and Simon

Chapter Summary: ⚠This chapter contains smut. See end notes for skip-to lines if you are uncomfortable with this content. Grace and Simon are settled into their life on Erid, they make a choice about where they'd like to be.

*Chapter Notes: *booming wizard voice* I Cast Domesticity!!!*

Light trickled in through the open window, and the sound of crashing waves almost lulled Grace back to sleep. He put his hand out and frowned, finding empty sheets around him.

He heard clinking in the kitchen, and then footsteps padding down the hall back towards him.

Grace stretched, closed his eyes again, and pulled a pillow to his chest. When the door creaked open, he turned his face so Simon could read his mumbled “You know there are laws here against leaving someone alone while they sleep.”

Simon gave him a low rumbling laugh. “It's a good thing the Legal hive decided the dome is an independent territory then.”

Grace held up one finger, still curled around the pillow. “I’d like to propose a new dome law.”

Simon gave him another chuckle and Grace felt the bed sink as Simon sat down on the edge. “Here, as penance for my crimes.”

Grace begrudgingly cracked one eye open. Simon held out a mug of something warm. Tendrils of steam curled up into the air, and Grace smelled maple syrup. Simon had a towel wrapped around his waist and his hair was still wet from the shower.

Grace sat up and accepted the offered mug. It was one of the synthesized nutritional sources the Eridians had come up with for them. With samples of the tree, and samples of Grace and Simon’s ‘meat’ they had been able to synthesize a handful of tasties. There was no coffee, but the Eridians had managed to come up with a caffeinated maple tea that, frankly, Grace could drink by the gallon.

Grace took a thankful sip and nodded at Simon solemnly “You are forgiven.”

Simon huffed a laugh and retrieved his own mug from the bedside table.

“How’s Adrian?” Grace asked. Simon and Adrian had become morning exercise buddies, which he suspected was less about fitness and more an opportunity for them to talk shit about Erid’s science community drama. Simon was deeply invested in a messy trio relationship that was happening in Adrian’s department.

“Big and mean.” Simon said.

Grace chuckled and took another sip of his maple coffee-substitute. ‘Big and mean’ had been Simon’s initial assessment of Adrian when they first met, and Simon had stuck to that assessment with great fondness.

Adrian had misunderstood that Simon and Grace could both understand Eridian, and had said they looked like 'mud scum.' Simon and Adrian had become instant friends after Simon had waved and replied (in a very out of tune) whistled Eridian *“and you look rock, stupid.”*

There were very few Eridian words that human mouths could approximate, but Simon had a talent for figuring out which words he *could* say and stringing them together.

“No class, right?” Simon asked.

“No, it’s one of the holidays today, can’t remember which one.”

Eridians seemed to have more holidays in a year than not. Grace guessed if you lived for hundreds of years, you were a little less worried about time. (Or maybe they just had better work-life-balance than humans.) The Eridian calendar was also markedly different from anything Grace could have expected after life on Earth. Eridians hadn't 'seen' or known about stars, or their planet’s place in the grander universe, until much more recently. So their holidays weren't on fixed calendar "days" related to the planet's turning or its orbit. Which made it hard to keep track of. Holidays came in a seemingly random order, depending on geological events or weather patterns that Grace and Simon weren't privy to in their dome. So Grace and Simon just rolled with the punches, and accepted holiday notices whenever one of the habitat dome scientists slipped one in with their groceries.

Simon hummed thoughtfully. “Well… If you don’t have class, I guess I’ll just have to entertain you myself.” He set his mug down and shot Grace a meaningful sideways glance.

Grace’s stomach flopped happily. “Mhmmm, will you now?”

Simon was already ducking his head under the covers and tugging Grace’s sweatpants down.

“AH! You’re gonna make me spill my—” Grace gasped in surprise and pleasure as Simon’s mouth wrapped around his still-soft dick. Grace let his head fall back against the bed frame and abandoned his mug to the side table. His fingers found purchase in Simon's still wet hair. “Oh God,” he moaned appreciatively.

Simon’s hand was sliding up and down Grace’s chest, caressing with a light touch. Grace’s pleasure grew as he did in Simon’s mouth.

Grace let himself melt into the bed as Simon’s hand curled possessively around his waist and pulled him closer, taking more of him into his mouth. Grace relished the sensation, letting his world shrink down to lips, and tongue, and teeth.

“Come up here.” Grace cupped a hand under Simon’s chin and gently pulled so he would look up.

Simon obeyed, kissing his way up Grace’s neck and pressing his mouth against his. Grace could taste himself on Simon's lips, sweet and bitter tang.

Grace snaked his hand between them and tugged at the towel still wrapped around Simon’s waist. “Get rid of this,” he ordered.

Grace felt Simon smile against his lips “Happily.” His low voice sent a shiver up Grace’s spine.

Clothes and towel were abandoned to the bedroom floor, and Grace pulled Simon back on top of him. Chest to chest, Grace lazily explored Simon with his hands, and lips. He kissed down Simon’s scruffy jaw and let his fingers trace down his back. He could feel Simon’s dick stiffening against his own. Their hips rolled against each other, and the urgency was building in the moans Simon was kissing into his open mouth.

Grace got his hands under Simon and pulled him up a little, so he was straddling him. He stroked up and down Simon’s dick with his fingers, and dragged his own appreciatively against the cleft of Simon’s ass. Simon shuddered under his touch, and Grace couldn’t help but admire him.

In the years they’d been on Erid a few strands of grey had appeared in Simon's dark hair, the scars had faded and his body had softened. He was

still muscled, but his stomach was softer, and the edges of him had relaxed, no longer taut with the effort of surviving.

Simon’s eyes flitted down to Grace with amusement. “Distracted?” He grunted.

Grace smiled, caught. “Only by you.”

Simon planted another hungry kiss on Grace’s mouth, his fingers squeezing Grace’s waist. “Good. Now tell me what to do.”

“Grab me the oil.” Grace said, giving Simon’s ass a pinch.

Obediently, Simon leaned over to the bedside table and retrieved the little tub of oil from the drawer. Grace pulled Simon closer onto his lap and kissed his chest as he lubed his fingers. Grace slipped his slicked hand under Simon and probed teasingly, caressing balls and taint, before circling his ass. Simon’s hand squeezed around Grace's waist, and he rocked his hips against Grace’s throbbing dick, trying to speed him up. “Did I tell you you could do that?” Grace nipped at the sensitive skin under his collar bone.

Simon half-moaned, half-groaned in exasperation, but still, he stopped and let Grace take his time. “I like it when you’re patient.” Grace lied.

He in fact *loved* when Simon was impatient. But this was part of the fun.

Grace took his time, kissing and caressing before he slipped two fingers inside of Simon, and put his teeth and tongue to work on Simon’s sensitive nipples. Simon was making soft low whimpering sounds and Grace could feel him starting to rock his hips again. He was pressing into Grace's fingers, and bucking slightly against Grace’s dick

Grace let it slide, moaning appreciatively and pulling Simon closer again so his dick could slide against Simon’s slicked hole. Simon widened his legs, still straddling Grace, to give him access. Grace slipped himself inside with a shudder and Simon’s lips parted breathlessly. His head fell back as he leaned into Grace’s slow thrusts, urging him deeper.

“God, you feel amazing.” Grace murmured, knowing Simon would probably only pick up on his tone when he was talking so quietly. But it needed to be said.

Simon’s hand was still wrapped around Grace’s waist, and Grace pulled it away and guided it to Simon’s own dick. Simon obliged, stroking himself while Grace thrust up into him. Grace wrapped his hands around Simon’s ass, squeezing the substantial handful admiringly.

Light was trickling in through the window, and a pool of warm light was catching perfectly on Simon’s face, bathing his skin in gold and glinting off the warm brown tones in his eyelashes.

Simon was moving against Grace with increasingly urgent noises and Grace forced him to slow. He held Simon still, sliding in and out of him with delicious, torturous languidness. “Slow down,” Grace whispered, tightening his grip on Simon’s ass.

Simon cracked an eye open and glowered teasingly before closing his eyes again. “Sorry, I didn't hear that,” he lied. He was trying to roll his hips again, pressing himself against Grace’s dick.

Grace pulled out and held Simon still, his dick throbbing as it brushed against Simon’s skin. Simon resisted, trying to tempt Grace back into him. He moaned in protest and kissed Grace's neck pleadingly.

Grace met Simon’s lips and kissed him deep, forcing a slow lazy pace. “Are you going to behave?” he asked.

Simon pulled back, considering.

Uh oh.

Simon hooked his arm under both of Grace’s and flipped them over Grace’s head. Grace's wrists were inescapably pinned overhead, under Simon’s forearm.

“No." Simon growled with a smile.

Grace was helpless as Simon lowered himself back onto Grace’s dick. He kissed him hard, tongue probing and his teeth biting at Grace's lower lip. Grace was just along for the ride now, his own hips bucking unbidden as Simon’s tight hole rippled around him.

Grace wanted this to last forever, but Simon was fucking him with ravenous urgency. They were both moaning into each other’s mouths, the slick frantic sensation of Simon clenched around him was sending Grace's brain into white hot frenzy. He tried to hold off for just a few seconds more, but gave up the fight. He felt his hips rock as he came inside of Simon with a pulsing, quivery joy.

Simon relinquished his hold on Grace’s wrists and reached down to stroke himself. He spent over Grace’s chest and doubled over slightly as he came. His hole shuddered around Grace who, sensitive and spent, was still inside him. "Oh God!" Grace gasped, his hands flying to Simon’s thighs as he went

nearly blind from the stimulation. Simon collapsed onto Grace’s chest with a satisfied hum and Grace caught his breath in a gasp as he slid his dick out from inside Simon. Grace could feel his own heartbeat and Simon’s pounding against his chest, and Grace nuzzled into the familiar weight and warmth of him. “Not feeling very patient this morning?” Grace murmured. Simon laughed, low and breathy against Grace's cheek. “Nope.”

“We’ll have to work on that.” Grace said in mock rebuke.

Simon nuzzled against Grace’s cheek, his stubble tickling his skin. “Lemme try again,” he said. “Happy to learn.” Simon’s hand crept down to Grace’s spent oversensitive dick and Grace batted him away with a panicked gasp. Simon chuckled again and wrapped himself around Grace’s middle.

Grace settled into him. He basked in their shared warmth. Sticky, and content, as they breathed each other in. Simon’s fingers traced lazy circles under the back of Grace‘s neck. “How did I get so fucking lucky?” he whispered.

Grace hummed and brushed a few kisses against Simon’s ear. “I kidnapped you. You can thank me whenever.”

Simon huffed a laugh and propped himself on his elbow. “I’ve been captive this whole time? Why didn’t you tell me?”

"I was waiting for you to figure it out.”

“Fuck.” Simon fell sideways down onto the bed with an exaggerated huff. “Well—” He rolled off the bed and disappeared momentarily before the bedding started to slide out from under Grace.

“Hey!”

“This is a prison riot!”

Grace tried to scramble away, but was pulled toppling out of the bed into a tangle of blankets and pillows on top of Simon. Simon wadded the comforter around them and put on his best theatrical voice “You don’t understand Grace, I’m not trapped in here with you, you’re trapped in here with me.”

“Jesus, you’ve been watching the worst movies lately.” Grace laughed.

Simon gave him a fake scowl. “I’m holding you hostage. You have to ask me for my demands.”

Grace rolled his eyes. “Oh nooOooO? What are your demands?”

“Big breakfast. The good stuff.”

Grace held up his hands in surrender. “I accept your terms.”

“Good.” Simon planted a long deep kiss on Grace’s mouth before he released him from the blanket prison.

A shower and a rummage through the cabinets later, Grace was cooking ‘the good stuff’

Me-burger sausage, synthesized maple flour pancakes (they were more the texture of cornbread, but Simon didn’t know the difference), and warm maple syrup. Simon lounged nearby messing with his latest additions to the human-to-Eridian language translators. One of the first things Simon had done after they had settled in, was fix the syntax problems in Grace’s original excel file translator, and finish fleshing out the shared vocabulary for English. Then, he had gotten to work on the rest of the languages he knew. Recently he’d even been learning and translating the other human languages from the *Hail Mary’s* archive.

There wouldn’t be any other humans on Erid anytime soon, not in their lifetimes. But Simon liked the work, and it meant that when first contact... or second contact happened, the Eridians would have everything they needed to get started.

Mornings like this made Grace wonder how life could have ever been different, for either of them. The universe was so big, and the number of coincidences that had needed to add up for them to both be here was enormous. But he couldn’t think of any other way this could have gone. He couldn’t imagine a better life, or really any life that didn’t end with their little house on a fake beach with a grove of maple trees out back.

“Breakfast for the captive,” he announced, setting two plates on the coffee table. They weren’t kitchen table people. (Maybe because Grace’s notes and to-be-graded homework doom piles were always on it but... who’s to say?)

They had just tucked in to breakfast and started scrolling through the familiar catalogue of shows from the *Hail Mary’s* storage, when they heard the buzzer that let them know someone was coming through the dome airlock. “Did Adrian say anything about someone coming to visit today?” Grace asked Simon.

“No, they said they were going to pop into the office to check on something and then take Rocky and the pebbles to the—” Simon waved his hand. “You know the holiday thing that’s happening.”

Rocky’s voice carried over the waves from outside. *“Mary, don’t—”* The door crashed open and four pint-sized Eridians in mini exosuits bounded inside.

Simon threw his arm up in delight. “Pebbles!”

The Eridian bio-sciences thrum had offered to create Simon and Grace children by splicing and cloning their DNA (which they had quickly declined due to… a number of reasons). But the Eridians didn’t seem to ‘get’ their hesitance, so Grace had explained the rich Earth tradition of “Gay Uncles.” Since then Rocky and Adrian’s pebbles had been frequent flyers to human-town. Their strange little family was more than Grace had ever dreamed for himself. It was perfect.

“Sorry to intrude,” Adrian hummed as they squeezed through the door. Adrian was much larger than Rocky, and the double-wide French doors barely accommodated them.

"Not at all!” Grace said, reaching for his cane so he could stand to greet them. “What’s the occasion?”

“We just got word from the Astronomy hive! They have news!” Rocky chirped, herding the four pebbles into the living room.

Simon stood up gesturing to the pebbles. “Okay, time for the adults to talk science— And time for Uncle Simon and the pebbles to go cause problems somewhere else!”

The smallest of the pebbles, Orion, let out a shriek *“Wrestling time!”*

Adrian hushed them with a warm drone. *“Actually, Simon. You will want to hear this too.”*

The pebbles protested in a discordant chorus and Simon sat back down hesitantly.

Rocky ushered the pebbles back to the door *“Go practice your moves outside.”*

Mary, the eldest pebble waved one of their appendages in front of their carapace menacingly, and tooted John Cena’s entrance music. *“Today you go down, Uncle Simon!”*

Simon had introduced the pebbles to the fantastic world of professional wrestling shortly after he had discovered it himself. So far, despite the pebbles combined numbers and best efforts, the score was Simon: 89, pebbles: 0.

With the pebbles gone, Grace braved the question. “What’s the news?”

His mind was already racing, if this news was coming from the Astrology hive it must be about the stars. Was this about Sol? About Earth?

Adrian hummed and nudged Rocky gently.

Vibrating, Rocky said “Sol has returned to full luminance, and we can see WISE 0855-0714 and the other Astrophage infected systems improving too!”

Grace gasped “Are you sure?”

Rocky was nearly bouncing now, his glimmering exosuit casting beams of light around the room.

“Yes! Certain. We came as soon as it was certain.”

Grace felt Simon reach over and squeeze his leg. Grace realized he was trembling. He could barely breathe.

It was over. They had won. It had all been worth it.

Rocky tilted his carapace, approaching cautiously. *“Grace, your face is leaking!"* He turned towards Simon *“Is this one, happy leak or sad leak?”*

“I’m happy of course!” Grace sobbed.

Rocky extended his balled claw tentatively. *“Is this a fist-bump situation?”*

Grace extended his fist and pulled Simon’s in as well.“A monumental fist-bump situation.”

The humans pressed their fists to Rocky’s. *“Rocky, and Grace, and Simon save stars,"* he hummed.

They lingered there for a long moment and Grace tried to calm down. Simon broke the silence, tucking his hand under his leg. “So, what happens now?”

Rocky slumped slightly and Adrian took a step to comfortingly encapsulate him in her broad arms. *“Your Hail Mary is fueled and in orbit if you want it. You can go home, or you can stay. Up to you.”*

Grace wiped at his eyes, he was crying again. He couldn't stop.

"Do you want to go home? To Earth?" Rocky asked in an uncharacteristically hushed tone.

"I— I don't know. It...it—" It was too much. Knowing it had worked, knowing there was something left on Earth to go back to. Grace reached out for Simon who was still quiet. "Do you want to go... Do you want to go back to Eden?"

"Fuck no." Simon said immediately, then winced. "I— would go to Earth with you, if you... If you'd have—"

Grace quickly squeezed Simon's hand and gently turned his face so he had to look him in the eye. "Anywhere we go, if we go, we go together. That's not a question." Simon still seemed to be mentally circling the conversation, not absorbing that, so Grace added, "You think you could get away from me if you tried?"

Simon broke into a weak relieved smile and Rocky cut in. "If I'm allowed to be selfish. I hope you both stay, but that's just me."

Adrian hummed agreement, but gently put one massive claw over Rocky's carapace, shushing him.

Grace studied Simon's face searching for an answer.

"Wherever you want to be, but I..." Simon trailed off.

"You can think about it, for as long as you would like." Adrian chimed gently.

"Yes, think about it! For a long long time!" Rocky added less gently.

"I... I think... we'd like to stay." Grace said, watching Simon's eyes flood with relief.

Grace let the taste of those words linger on his tongue. They surprised him, but they felt right, inevitable.

Adrian was saying something, explaining the specifics of the Astrology hive's findings. One of the pebbles, Aurelius, poked their carapace in through the front door*. "Can Uncle Simon come play yet?"*

Simon got up, squeezing Grace's hand before letting go. "You're all going down," he told Aurelius.

The pebbles were on him in an instant climbing on him like he was their personal playground.

“Be careful!” Rocky exclaimed. *“Space blobs are soft!”*

“Not this space blob!” Simon grunted, scooping Orion and Mary in one arm and dragging Aurelius who was clinging to his leg, out the door and onto the beach.

The fourth pebble, Ryland, trailed behind them. “Uncle Simon, why don’t you and Uncle Grace lay eggs?”

“'Cause we don’t eat enough vegetables,” Simon replied flatly.

Ryland was unconvinced. “You’re lying!”

“What’s a vegetable?” Orion asked, trying to wriggle out of Simon’s one-armed bear hug.

Adrian extended a claw and laid it gently on Grace’s leg. “Are you certain? We would love for you to stay. But I know it’s not home.”

Grace tried to think of anything waiting for him on Earth. When he had thought he was going home all those years ago, the only thing he had in mind was a few choice words for Stratt.

Those didn’t seem to matter as much today.

His fingers lingered on his cane leaning against the couch next to him. Erid’s gravity had been hard on him. Maybe they would figure out how to lessen the strain on his coma-weakened bones, maybe they wouldn’t. That was okay.

He let his attention drift out the open front door where Simon wrestled the small hoard of pebbles on the beach. He was narrating their match and making exaggerated impact noises each time they landed a feeble hit. Grace could hear the waves crashing, and he could see the small grove of maple trees swaying in the artificial wind.

“I… think this is home for us. If you’ll have us. “

“YES! Yes,” Adrian chimed, only barely managing to contain their relief.

Rocky shuffled out from under Adrian and leaned against Grace humming warmly. *“Grace and Simon stay forever. Happy, happy, happy, happy.”*

Chapter End Notes: To skip smut stop reading at: [Simon hummed thoughtfully. “Well… If you don’t have class, I guess I’ll just have to entertain you myself.” He set his mug down and shot Grace a meaningful sideways glance.] and skip to [Simon’s fingers traced lazy circles under the back of Grace‘s neck. “How did I get so fucking lucky?” he whispered.]

Chapter 41: Epilogue: Rocky and Adrian

Chapter Summary: Rocky's 'community theatre' troupe performs at a big festival.

*Chapter Notes: This is the last chapter! Thank you for reading! Writing this has been stupidly fun, and genuinely helped me work through some things. I'm not going to over-share on the internet, but suffice it to say--- Thank you, it meant a lot to know there were people along for the ride with me. Okay, buh byeeeeeeeeeeee!!! *Markiplier outro music plays as I ascend into the stars to reunite with my beloved blender**

Rocky woke with the familiar pressure of Adrian on top of him. As he stirred, Adrian hummed a greeting and shifted to let him get up if he wanted to. He didn't. Rocky clacked his claw in a grabby motion and Adrian settled their weight back over him with a rumbling laugh.

"Hello, Love." They hummed warmly.

Rocky nuzzled into the crook of two of Adrian's arms, and hummed a wordless greeting. Even after all these years of being back home, it was still such a relief to wake up to their voice. Rocky reached up and traced over one of the many adornments Adrian was wearing. It was a dangling xenonite chime that spelled their name in an archaic notes script. It was gaudy, many years out of fashion, and like the other sixty Rocky-made adornments that dotted Adrian's carapace, they never took it off.

"Are you ready for today?" Adrian asked. The vibration of their notes rumbled against the top of Rocky's carapace.

Rocky clicked anxiously and resisted the urge to hide further under Adrian.

After Rocky had returned home, and set up Adrian and the science hives with the information they needed about astrophage and taumeoba, he had retired from engineering. He was now a full-time parent, and had devoted his spare time to creating Erid's first 'community theatre.'

Turns out Eridians are not very good at lying or acting. Since Eridians could hear all of the involuntary internal reactions in the actors' bodies… no performance is very convincing. Which is probably why they never came up

with an art-form similar to humans. On the other claw though, the project hadn't been in vain, what Eridians and Rocky excelled at— was puppets.

Rocky and his ragtag crew of hobbyists had been indulged by the Arts and Culture hive for years (likely in no small part due to Rocky being one of the 'saviors of Erid') but this was going to be their first big event.

The Arts and Culture hive had agreed that Rocky's troupe could lead the [musical notes] festival thrum. But the festival had come early. The festival usually landed a few cycles later, but due to a fluke weather pattern it was today. [musical note-name of the festival] was always celebrated after the first cold-storm following the regular eruption of the central geyser.)

"Not ready. I wish I had more time." Rocky picked at his claws ruefully.

"I'm sure it will be beautiful. You have worked hard, Love."

Rocky hummed an affirmation, but Adrian must have heard the doubt in it. They shifted around, giving him another clicking laugh. "When Simon watched your rehearsal, he leaked. Said it was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful." Adrian rested one of her massive claws on the top of Rocky's carapace. "You are being stupid," they said lovingly.

Rocky blew a clattering guffaw. "Fine. No more being stupid," he said. He wiggled out from under his mate and bonked affectionately against them. "Just for you I will stop being stupid."

Adrian hummed with doubt. "I'm sure."

***

The festival grounds were already full by the time Rocky and Adrian arrived. The humans were somewhere around with the pebbles in tow. Hopefully they weren't being mobbed by curious/grateful Eridians. They had been here long enough that most local Eridians had seen them before, but it was still a novelty for them to leave their dome.

Adrian brushed against Rocky and tilted a claw. "There they are."

Rocky listened hard in that direction and heard Grace's voice mixed in with the chattering crowd. The humans must have caught sight of them too

because he heard Simon’s whistle cut through the noise, beaconing him and Adrian over.

“You go sit," Rocky started. "I will join after I check on the—” Adrian scooped him up, halting his departure.

“No no, let your troupe do it, *‘mr. director.’*” Adrian ignored Rocky’s weak protests and carried him across the grounds to where their humans and their pebbles were waiting.

Grace sat crosslegged in the walking-vehicle Rocky had helped design for him. Little pebble Ryland chittered in his lap, firing off science questions. Beside him, the other three pebbles were crawling all over Simon’s exo-suit and whistling wrestling theme songs.

As they approached, Grace and Simon both raised their hands and waved. The nearby Eridian bystanders wiggled excitedly, ‘waving like a human’ had become a trend, and it was frequently the thing Grace and Simon were asked to demonstrate by over-excited fans.

Adrian plopped Rocky down beside their pebbles and the humans. “Hello Grace. Hello Simon. Were the pebbles well behaved?”

Grace nodded. “Absolute angels.”

Almost simultaneously, Simon held Aurelius aloft “Except for you!” Aurelius squirmed and giggled.

“Didn’t cheat! Uncle Simon is a liar.”

“You got me when my back was turned!” Simon squeezed Aurelius under the crook of his arm and gave him an affectionate *‘noogie*’.

A trumpeting choir of voices washed over the crowd, and an anticipatory quiet fell over the gathered Eridians.

Rocky’s carapace shivered in equal anxiety and pride. *Show time.*

His little troupe spiraled into the crowd holding articulated, larger-than-life puppets overhead. The youngest member of the troupe, [musical notes name] who Grace had given the human name *“Capricorn”* started off the song with their crisp clear voice.

Rocky had chosen an old song-story for this festival, one almost everyone would know and could sing along to.

Similar to how hives thrummed to solve problems, it was also an old tradition to thrum together on holidays to tell and re-tell old songs that matched the holiday.

This story was perfect for this festival. It was eerie, and full of mystery, and danger. It was very old, from when Eridians had first discovered space beyond their atmosphere. When they had first realized space, their star, and other stars existed. The story was deeply tied to the moment Eridians first realized there was a whole universe outside of what they could hear and touch, and they were alone in it.

It had been a turbulent time for Eridians, and all of the expert hives had come to different conclusions about what it meant for them as a species. Some thought it meant their lives were meaningless, some thought it proved their importance because as far as they knew, Erid and its inhabitants were the only living things in the whole universe.

Song-stories from this time tended to be rife with unfathomable expanses, and unhearable things that lurked in the empty. Monsters that would come from space that Eridians couldn't touch or hear.

The troupe's massive puppets swooped overhead, and more and more voices from the crowd joined in to add their voices to the thrumming song.

A jingling monster with long spindly legs and wings passed over Rocky and his family. This puppet took four Eridians to puppeteer. They hummed ominously, earning a delighted squeal from the pebbles. Aurelius, Mary, Ryland, and Orion hummed along to the song, still too young to thrum fully, but not too young to feel and hear it. Simon hummed along with them. His voice was simple. He couldn't make all of the sounds, but his rich notes added to the harmony and guided a wiggling Aurelius through the melody.

Another monstrous puppet passed overhead, this one smaller and more regal than the first one. The lone puppeteer, [musical notes] (whom Simon had given the human name *"Arbor"*) gave Rocky a quiet excited chirp as they passed. They had been so nervous that their little puppet wouldn't stand out compared to the other larger-than-life monsters, but their sweeping dancing path through the crowd was met with a chorus of fascinated trills and clattering carapaces. Arbor had a gift for making the hollow puppets feel alive, like they were thinking and thrumming with energy.

The story-song they were adding a physical performance to had a lot of different versions. Always beginning with the loneliness of being the only things in the universe. And then continuing with Eridians imagining the frightening untouchable things that could come down from the sky. Eridians

had been so afraid to learn that they were affected by things they couldn't perceive, like astronomical cycles, and the star that kept them warm.

This song-story had fallen out of popularity when astrophage had been discovered for obvious reasons. But Rocky had wanted to give it a new ending.

One by one, the imagined monsters disappeared as their puppeteers laid them down on the outer edge of the crowd.

This was the part Rocky was nervous about, this was where the troupe was going to diverge from the familiar song and veer into… original material. Rocky started to shudder anxiously, and Adrian pulled him close and quietly hummed. "It will be beautiful."

Almost all of the puppeteers gathered under one massive open puppet that fluttered in the wind. It was made entirely of light gauzy fabrics that Rocky hoped conveyed the open, empty expanse of space. Fully unraveled, it covered nearly the whole length of the festival grounds. He heard a few of the on-lookers point up and speculate that it was meant to represent space and that set his mind at ease.

As the familiar part of the song-story came to an end, the festival grounds quieted. He heard a few confused trills but Capricorn's sharp, crisp voice cut through the crowd one more time. This time, they sang the haunting and hopeful new melody the troupe had come up with together.

While the rest of the troupe had converged to puppeteer the open expanse of space, Capricorn had taken on the role of a ship. The one that Rocky and the other 22 Eridians had left on all those years ago. They were lending notes to the otherwise empty and silent soundscape. They were giving voice to the crew. Their singing was afraid and hopeful.

Rocky heard his crewmate's names ripple through the crowd, as the thrumming Eridians recognized the new characters that had been introduced to the story. Adrian leaned in close, soothing the well worn grief that they knew Rocky was releasing into this song-story.

It still hurt to think about his crew, but he wanted to tie them with the success they had made possible. He wanted to remember them as part of all of the good that had happened, not just the loss. Their names deserved to be part of the happy ending.

Capricorn lifted the ship's puppet into the air. They quieted their notes to convey growing distance, as the ship rose deeper into the rippling fabric.

Enmeshed in the gauze of the space puppet, Rocky had sewn a small simple machine that could replay sounds— the way Grace's human thinking machine did. He could see Arbor excitedly fiddling with the remote that would play the recording when the time came.

The crowd was quiet as Capricorn sang the final few notes. This song-story usually ended with a monster coming out from the dark. It was a horror story, one that always ended in tragedy and death and nothing else. But this time the story was going to have a different ending.

Arbor clicked the remote, and the little device overhead played the voices Rocky had recorded with Simon and Grace. It was their human voices. It was them saying hello and how happy they were to know that they weren't alone.

The crowd didn't have a familiar song-story to respond with, there was no script past this point, but the thrum exploded with song. The festival grounds around Rocky burst into a chorus of greetings and waving claws.

Hello! Hello! We are so happy! We are so happy we are not alone! We are so happy it was you!